



# **NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL**

**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

## **THESIS**

**UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY FAILURES  
TOWARD REVOLUTIONARY IRAN: MISCALCULATING  
TEHRAN'S POWER PROJECTION AND IGNORING THE  
NATIONAL CHARACTER OF THE IRANIAN PEOPLE**

by

Ömür Öz

December 2010

Thesis Co-Advisors:

Robert Looney  
Abbas Kadhim

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REVOLUTIONARY IRAN: MISCALCULATING TEHRAN'S POWER  
PROJECTION AND IGNORING THE NATIONAL CHARACTER OF THE  
IRANIAN PEOPLE**

**Ömür Öz**

First Lieutenant, Turkish Air Force  
B.S., Turkish Air Force Academy, 2002

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December 2010**

Author: **Ömür Öz**

Approved by: **Robert Looney**  
Co-Advisor

**Abbas Kadhim**  
Co-Advisor

**Harold A. Trinkunas, PhD**  
Chairman, Department of National Security Affairs

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## **ABSTRACT**

The challenges that Iran poses are, arguably, some of the most significant foreign policy issues leading Washington's agendas today. Iran's power projection and regional ambitions, according to many American politicians and social scientists, defy the U.S. and its allies in the region. However, more than three decades of U.S. foreign policies towards Iran, including economic sanctions, political pressure and intimidation have neither altered the Islamic authority's aggressive diplomacy nor achieved regime change; instead, these foreign policy choices—by arousing nationalist sentiment and revealing a collective sense of discontent toward American policies among many Iranians—have actually facilitated hardliners in gaining public support. In this context, this thesis, by assessing the lessons learned from previous U.S. strategies, their successes and failures, and by considering the unintentional consequences, many of which caused a backlash among the Iranian people, as well as by examining the political and social climate that exists in Iran today, looks for a sustainable, viable and ultimately successful resolution within the Iranian society.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| AIOC  | Anglo Iranian Oil Company  |
| APOC  | Anglo Persian Oil Company  |
| BIBP  | British Imperial Bank of Persia  |
| CIA   | Central Intelligence Agency  |
| EO    | Executive Order  |
| IAEA  | International Atomic Energy Agency   |
| ILSA  | Iran-Libya Sanctions Act   |
| ISA   | Iran Sanctions Act   |
| MEK   | Mujahedi e Khalgh  |
| MI6   | Directorate of Military Intelligence Section 6   |
| NATO  | North Atlantic Treaty Organization   |
| NSS   | National Security Strategy   |
| SAVAK | Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar (National Intelligence and Security Organization) |
| SCO   | Shanghai Cooperation Organization  |
| UN    | United Nations   |
| US    | United States  |
| WMD   | Weapons of Mass Destruction  |
| WTO   | World Trade Organization   |

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# **I. UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY FAILURES TOWARD REVOLUTIONARY IRAN: MISCALCULATING TEHRAN'S POWER PROJECTION AND IGNORING THE NATIONAL CHARACTER OF THE IRANIAN PEOPLE**

## **A. INTRODUCTION**

The prolonged Iranian question is arguably one of the most salient foreign policy issues topping United States' agendas today. Iran's power projection and regional ambitions defy the U.S. and its allies in the region as well as undermine the Middle East peace process.<sup>1</sup> More than three decades of U.S. foreign policies towards Iran—economic sanctions, political pressure, containment, intimidation and rogue state rollback—have neither altered Islamic authority's aggressive diplomacy nor achieved regime change; instead, these foreign policy choices—by arousing nationalist sentiment and revealing a collective sense of discontent toward American policy among many Iranians—have actually facilitated hardliners in gaining public support. Furthermore, these same policies have also adversely affected U.S. domestic/international political and economic national interests.

In the context of analyzing the political and social climate that exists in Iran today, this thesis attempts to address the following questions: Has U.S. foreign policy achieved its objectives in dealing with challenges posed by Iran since the Iranian Islamic Revolution? If not, what are the reasons that lie behind this U.S. political breakdown? Secondly, this thesis will also consider the following questions: Is the Islamic Republic of Iran an actual threat to global security or is it more specifically a challenge to the United States and its allies in particular? What are the unintentional consequences of U.S. foreign policies toward Iran? Has U.S. foreign policy assisted rising hardliners and facilitated public support for them? Finally, this thesis will examine alternative policy options for United States' policy makers dealing with Iran.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederic Wehrey, et al. *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*. (Santa Monica, CA : RAND Project Air Force, 2009), 1.

Undoubtedly, the challenges posed by Iran have been one of the foremost concerns of U.S. foreign policy makers for more than half a decade. Underlining nuclear efforts and the desire for weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in ambitions of the Iranian regime, George W. Bush warns: “We may face no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran.”<sup>2</sup> In the same vein, by emphasizing the failure of his predecessor’s inability to deal with the challenges that the Islamic Republic of Iran presented the United States, President Barack Obama cautioned, in the 2010 U.S. National Security Strategy, that “Iran’s behavior became more threatening.”<sup>3</sup> Looking beyond its nuclear aspirations, the Iranian regime’s support for terrorism worldwide, intimidating rhetoric toward Israel, inhibitive strategy toward Middle East peace and Iraqi state-building processes, as well as its domestic human rights abuses have generated broader concerns for the United States regarding Iran.<sup>4</sup> The Islamic Republic’s neighbors and Israel share many U.S. concerns, although they often evaluate those challenges differently than the U.S. when calculating their own relationship with or policies toward Iran.<sup>5</sup>

By considering the challenges Iran poses, many political studies on Iran suppose that the U.S. has to deal with the Iranian question one way or another. Some scholarly pieces and policy papers, however, depict the Iranian question as “tough” and “unsolvable.”<sup>6</sup> In this context, this thesis, by assessing the lessons learned from previous strategies’ success and failure and by considering their unintentional consequences, which caused a backlash among the Iranian people, looks for a sustainable, viable and ultimately successful resolution within the Iranian society, rather than via third-party, external actor solutions such as sanctions and containment strategies.

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<sup>2</sup> The United States, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. (Washington, DC: White House, 2006), 20.

<sup>3</sup> The United States, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: White House, 2010), 26.

<sup>4</sup> The United States, (2006), 20.

<sup>5</sup> Casey L. Addis, et al., *Iran: Regional Perspectives and U.S. policy October 7, 2009*. CRS Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service (2009), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Charles A. Douglass and Michael D. Hays. *A US Strategy for Iran*. Walker Paper, (Alabama: Air University Press, 2008), 1.



The major challenge in dealing with the Iranian question has been the mutual mistrust and undiplomatic discourse that typified United States-Iranian relations since the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979. The Islamic revolution also marked the beginning of the deadlock and hostility between the two parties, which never lost its vehemence for more than three decades. Successive U.S. administration officials' characterizations of Iran as a "rogue" state and their allegations regarding Iran's efforts to acquire WMD and promotion of terrorism worldwide, coupled with the Iranian regime's insolent response toward the U.S. as a retaliatory measure, have comprised some of the major reasons of rising animosity between these two nations.<sup>7</sup> These factors that are source of mutual hostility between both countries have also constituted the main determinative of U.S. and Iran foreign policies, priorities and objectives in the region.

Another problem preventing resolution regarding the Iranian question includes the Iranian hardliners' attitudes against the United States and perceptions of U.S. policies as threatening to their sovereignty. From the Iranian administration's perspective, the U.S. accusations and allegations have no solid basis in reality. Tehran has categorically denied these accusations and allegations and has defined U.S. policy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran as "antagonistic" and "contemptuous" since the fall of Iran's pro-American monarchy. Iranian administration officials vocally condemned U.S. foreign policy, which—according to them—aims to regain its previous influence in Iran and materialize "U.S. hegemonic" goals in the region.<sup>8</sup> The U.S. military presence in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf has been considered a siege, threatening Iran's sovereignty. Furthermore, Tehran believes that "the Iranian Islamic government's autonomous foreign and domestic policies pose a challenge to the U.S.-led Western bloc's preponderant political, military and economic influence in the Persian Gulf and

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<sup>7</sup> Gawdat Bahgat, "Iran and the United States: Reconcilable Differences?" *Iranian Studies* 36, no. 2 (April 2008): 141.

<sup>8</sup> Enyatollah Yazdani and Hussain Rizwan, "United States' Policy towards Iran after the Islamic Revolution: An Iranian Perspective." *International Studies* 43 no.3 (2006): 267.

Southwest Asia.”<sup>9</sup> Finally, the U.S.’s support for domestic opposition movements against the Iranian regime have been perceived as meddling in Iran’s affairs and denounced by Iranian hardliners in the government.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the long-lasting animosity between both parties, the unintentional consequences of U.S. strategies toward Iran constitute another challenge throughout the problem-solving process. In this context, this thesis claims that the unintentional consequences of U.S. policy implementation in the region actually assists Iranian hardliners’ justification of their anti-Western and aggressive domestic and foreign policies, as well as gaining their support by generating oppositional collective national sentiments among the Iranian people against a post-Cold War new American foreign policy toward Iran. Despite the challenges discussed above, when considering the Iranian question, this thesis assumes that by using holistic insights and innovative and systematic thinking, the Iranian question can ultimately be solved.

United States foreign policy toward Iran, for more than three decades, lacked necessary cultural, historical, and ideological context. U.S. policymakers consistently failed to capture the essence of Iranian identity and what it means to be ‘Iranian’ in a more holistic sense. What inspires Iranians? Why do many Iranians stress the importance of the Iranian revolution as a key transition point in its storied past? Do U.S. policymakers consider the strength and power the influence of Islam wields on Iranian life, foreign policy, and the story of the Iranian people in *their* context and from *their* perspective? Iran, like many countries—including France and Turkey, among others—places a weighty emphasis on history and the once-powerful empires of which they were a part. This largely misdirected and oft misunderstood perception of Iranian intentions, coupled with the dynamism inherent in international posturing, led U.S. president after president from one failed policy to the next when it came to dealing with the unique case of Iran.

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<sup>9</sup> Enyatollah Yazdani and Hussain Rizwan, “United States’ Policy towards Iran after the Islamic Revolution: An Iranian Perspective.” *International Studies* 43 no.3 (2006): 267.

<sup>10</sup> Jahangir Amuzegar, “Iran’s Crumbling Revolution.” *Foreign Affairs* 82 no.1 (Jan.-Feb. 2003):44–57.

A cookie-cutter approach toward Iran was often applied, despite its unique characteristics. Additionally, U.S. leadership relied on second-hand information and the perceptions of allied partners—in addition to regional enemies—who had their own national interests at the heart of their recommendations to the United States, providing a misleading, distorted political framework to operate within. It is this rather blatant ignorance on the part of Washington decision makers that led to continued faulty, misinformed strategic miscalculations when interfacing with Tehran. A former CIA agent who provided key inputs to three successive U.S. presidents, Bruce Riedel, underscores this point. He states that “for thirty years, the United States has tried to deal with Iran and its revolutionary ideology without a well-grounded understanding of what motivates and inspires Iranians.”<sup>11</sup>

Three important factors—national pride, resentment toward external meddling and *Ithna Ashari Shi’ism* as a state religion—have had great influence on Iranian national behavior. If these tenets, which are at the crux of the worldview of Iranian people and leaders are ignored or otherwise dismissed, as many scholars indicate, it makes it nearly impossible to understand the current political behavior and power projection of Iran. Chapter II, in this context, will address the source of these three main characteristics of the Iranian people, often overlooked by “beltway” politicians.

Although the consideration and attention given studies of each of the challenges posed by Iran individually demonstrate diversity, unquestionably, many politicians and scholars share similar ideas regarding these issues. Some of the key issues include the Iranian regime’s nuclear weapons ambitions, its support for terrorism, and its efforts to undermine the Middle East peace and Iraqi state-building processes.<sup>12</sup> However, the question of whether or not the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly its nuclear agenda, actually poses a threat to global security is still a subject of intense scholarly debate. Indeed, the debates often center on the challenges Iran poses to Western governments, the

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<sup>11</sup> Bruce Riedel, “America and Iran: Flawed Analysis, Missed Opportunities, and Looming Dangers,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 15, no.1 (Winter 2008): 101.

<sup>12</sup> R. Nicholas Burns, “U.S. Policy Toward Iran,” *Vital Speeches of the Day*, 73 no.6 (June 2007): 252–257.

motivations behind Iranian foreign policy-makers and the projected future trends in Iranian strategy. Is Iran an ideologically driven, irrational state? Or can it otherwise be argued that Iran is, in fact, the model of a pragmatic rational state?

Chapter III, therefore, addresses the domestic and foreign policy drivers underscoring Iranian national interests from the onset of the Islamic Republic. This chapter also analyzes Iranian worldviews and affiliated threat perceptions, emphasizing the associated pragmatic ideological framework Tehran operate within. This is often contrary to U.S. perceptions of Tehran, since the U.S. does not often consider Iran a rational actor in the international political playground. The latter portion of this chapter underlines the preeminent themes prevalent in Iranian regional strategy. At first blush, Iranian regional strategy may seem ideologically driven and expansionist. However, when viewed through a different lens, these themes stress a broad-based, multi-layered homeland defense and regime survival strategy.

Chapter IV analyses the policy implications of several successive U.S. administrations, from Jimmy Carter to Barack Obama, attempting to deal with the perceived challenged Iran posed. This chapter also presents both the unintentional domestic and international consequences of the U.S. strategy in the region. Additionally, this part of the thesis examines the underlying causes of the rising hostility between the U.S. and Iranian regimes over time.

For nearly three decades, a myriad of pundits have proposed various ways to deal with Tehran and its seemingly confrontational ideology. On one hand, some scholars and politicians see Iran as an enemy and assume that the only way to solve the *Iranian question* is to defeat Iran using whatever options are required to achieve this goal, including military strikes.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, other scholars and politicians suggest that the best strategy for dealing with Iran is to maintain or strengthen current economic sanctions and the political isolation of the country rather than the use of military

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Ledeen, *Accomplice to Evil: Iran and the War Against the West*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009. And, Thomas Holsinger, "Military Force Is the Best Option for Dealing with Iran," in *Is Iran a Threat to Global Security?*, edited by Julia Bauder 65–77 (New York: Greenhaven Press, 2006).

intervention.<sup>14</sup> Yet a third policy recommendation for solving the Iranian problem comes from reformist-minded politicians and scholars who believe in the importance of bilateral and multilateral political negotiations and who advocate an engagement option designed to achieve the elusive ultimate success with Iran instead of economic sanctions and political isolations. In this context, Chapter V analyzes four different U.S. policy options attempting to deal with the Iranian question prevalently argued in scholarly literature: the *Military Option*, *Regime Change*, *Containment*, and *Engagement Option*.

## **B. METHODS AND SOURCES**

Scrutinizing and analyzing political and social transformations in Iran and examining shifting U.S. foreign strategy over time is essential not only for understanding the contemporary situation in the region and challenges posed by Iran, but also to come up with new proposals addressing these challenges. In this context, the study employs a historical analysis method in order to understand the U.S.-Iran relationship over time; it also uses a political analysis method with quantitative and qualitative research techniques to evaluate former U.S. administrations' foreign strategies, and it presents recommendations for incumbent and future U.S. administrations.

This thesis employs data obtained through scholarly secondary sources such as books, articles in journals and newspapers, government documents and publications, research centers' reports and documentaries. In addition to the aforementioned sources, this study, particularly the last chapter, uses primary sources, such as public opinion polls conducted with Iranian people by *World Public Opinion*, *Terror Free Tomorrow* and *Pew Research Center*, etc.

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<sup>14</sup> Kenneth M. Pollack, "Iran: Three Alternative Futures," *The Middle East Review of International Affairs* 10 no.2 (June 2006); Charles A. Douglass and Michael D. Hays. *A US Strategy for Iran*. Walker Paper (Alabama: Air University Press, 2008).

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## II. UNDERSTANDING IRAN: THE INFLUENCE OF PAST EXPERIENCES AND RELIGION ON IRANIAN AFFAIRS

According to a foreign policy metaphor, past experiences affect nations' future behaviors, shape their judgment of present realities of life and form their national traits. Some experiences and memories have such a deep impact on a nation's consciousness that they are passed on from generation to generation and never lose their influence or historical allure, even when no longer justified by current realities.<sup>15</sup> This claim can be applied almost perfectly to Iran's case. According to many scholars, the Iranian people have a "visceral" tie with their past. Therefore, the influence of past experiences plays a significant role in determining Iran's foreign policy and international relations, particularly with the U.S. and Middle Eastern countries.

In the literature regarding Iran, many scholars share a consensus that there are three interrelated characteristics of the Iranian people, derived largely from their shared past—nationalistic pride, resentment toward foreign interference and strategic Shi'a marginalization—shaping Iran's international orientation.<sup>16</sup> Iranian policymakers, "consciously" or not, have been intensely affected not only by their country's extensive and glorious history but also by its traumatic past experiences with foreign powers.

Another critical element that dramatically impacts Iranian leaders' strategic decision making is their officially sanctioned state religion, Shi'a Islam. Shi'i religious-cultural traditions have always been at the heart of Iranian society and politics. In particular, three central aspects of Shi'ite Islam—the *imamate* (the successors to Ali), loyalty to Islamic jurisprudence and Islamic scholars (the concept of *Mujtahid*) and the uprising against oppressors (Kerbela Motif)—have been transformed into political

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<sup>15</sup> Shireen T. Hunter, *Iran and the World: Continuity in a Revolutionary Decade* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 7.

<sup>16</sup> Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2006). Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2004). And, William R. Polk, *Understanding Iran: Everything You Need to Know, From Persia to the Islamic Republic, from Cyrus to Ahmedinejad* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

discourse and activities in Iran.<sup>17</sup> If these tenets, which are at the crux of the worldview of Iranian people and leaders, are ignored or otherwise dismissed as many scholars indicate, it makes it nearly impossible to understand the current political behavior and power of projection of Iran. For example, when emphasizing the past failures of U.S. negotiations dealing with the Iranian issue, Limbert notes, “American negotiators need not be scholars of Iran or know all about, for example, the Sassanians, Samanids, and Safavids. They should, however, at least be aware of the past that has gone into forming the views and approaches of the Iranian side.”<sup>18</sup> In this context, this chapter focuses on three historical elements, national pride, a deep and historic resentment of external meddling into Iranian domestic affairs and the central concepts of Shi’a Islam, which have significant influences on current Iranian political behavior.

#### **A. NATIONAL PRIDE**

In his book, *The Persian Puzzle*, Kenneth Pollack describes Persia (which in 1935 became the state of Iran): “In its days, the Persian Empire was a super power like nothing the world had ever seen—with a monotheistic religion, a vast army, a rich civilization, a new and remarkable efficient method of administration, and territory stretching from Egypt to Central Asia.”<sup>19</sup> Pollack stresses that the seven-millennial glorious Persian history is a major source of national pride for Iranians. The Iranian people, as well as their leaders, know their history well. In every stage of their education, from primary school to university, they constantly learn Persian history. Art, poetry and folklore persistently emphasize ancient Persian greatness. This historical awareness of the Iranian people forms a corresponding belief that Iran is historically superior to other nations in the region. As such, Iran should become the dominant actor in its neighborhood. In the same vein, Iranians also reject the hegemonic tendencies of other nations, especially

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<sup>17</sup> A.K. Ramakrishnan, *U.S. Perception of Iran: Approaches and Policies* (New Delhi: New Century Publication, 2008), 17.

<sup>18</sup> John W. Limbert, *Negotiating with Iran: Wrestling the Ghosts of History* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2009), 15.

<sup>19</sup> Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, 3.



while conducting state-to-state relations.<sup>20</sup> Ray Takeyh, in his book, *Hidden Iran*, explains the nature of the Iranian perception of self-superiority. He states that perhaps more so than any other country in its region, Iran perceives itself as the leading nation among those in its immediate neighborhood. Through successive generations, Iran's historical spirit has embedded itself in the minds of its people and been a large part of the uniqueness and splendor associated with the Iranian identity and what it means to be Iranian. The contemporary Iranian identity is strongly linked to the perceived important contributions they have singularly made to civilization *writ large* over the course of their history. This sense of superiority sits at the center of Iranian worldview and psychology—over the Arabs or the Turks in their geographic neighborhood. Although the Persian Empire declined in size and influence over the centuries vis-à-vis newly emerging, appealing Western cultures, the Iranian ego and its sense of self importance in the world was largely retained. Although Iran is no longer the great Persian Empire of the days of the ancient scholars and great historical anthologies—and in fact has been overshadowed by new superpowers over the course of time—its perception of itself is as if it is still the Persian Empire of old. As such, they should still be the regional hegemon.<sup>21</sup>

Tehran's international relations in the region, not merely with the Arab states but also with Central Asian governments and Israel, as well as its nuclear ambitions today illustrate that Iran still pursues the objective of becoming a regional power. Iranian public support for their leaders geared toward achieving Iran's stated national objectives is yet another element demonstrating the importance of national pride in Iranian society.

## **B. RESENTMENT TO EXTERNAL MEDDLING: GREAT BRITAIN AND SOVIET RUSSIA**

Iranian behavior has, in large part, been shaped by a nationalistic pride derived from its glorious yet distant history. However, this national pride finds even deeper roots in Iranians' resentment toward foreign intervention in domestic and foreign affairs.

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<sup>20</sup> Adam Tarock, *Iran's Foreign Policy since 1990: Pragmatism Supersedes Islamic Ideology* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 1999), 3.

<sup>21</sup> Ray Takey, *Hidden Iran*, 61.

Throughout its modern history, Iran has been subject to territorial contraction, exploitation and manipulation by foreign powers. Over the last two centuries, humiliating experiences such as these remain exceptionally vivid in Iranians' minds and place more than a small dent in their national pride.<sup>22</sup>

In 1813, Persia lost what is today's Azerbaijan, Dagestan and Eastern Georgia to Russia at the end of the first Russo-Persian War under the Treaty of Gulistan. This treaty simultaneously marked the beginning of the "great game," the strategic rivalry between Britain and Russia aimed at achieving supremacy in Central Asia. Between 1857 and 1928, the Persian Empire's territorial losses later increased to include western Afghanistan, Balochistan, Turkmenistan and the Caucasus.<sup>23</sup>

Sharp, heightened feelings of national dishonor accompanied these territorial losses, which also brought about decreasing political and economic independence. The increasing foreign encroachment and political gaming and manipulation of Iranian domestic affairs by the then-superpowers of Russia and Britain, in addition to the international dynamic resulting from the weakness of Iran's Qajar dynasty, fuelled a growing national fervor and consciousness among Iranian society, notably in scattered urban bazaars and among religious figures (*ulema*).<sup>24</sup>

Through the end of nineteenth century, the newly emerging Iranian middle class (the *bazaatist* and *ulema*)—later known as the traditional middle class—argued that the best way to preserve the independence and territorial integrity of Iran was to generate a fundamental transformation in the Iranian political system. Under the influence of nationalist sentiments, the middle class began to incite revolutionary activities, resulting in the Constitutionalist Revolution of 1906. This revolutionary movement achieved its unimaginable goal, and forced the Shah of Persia, Muzaffer al-Din Shah, to establish Iran's first parliament (*Majles*) in August, 1906 and to promulgate the first constitution in

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<sup>22</sup> Hunter, *Iran and the World*, 8.

<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Katzman, *Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses (June 11, 2010)*, CRS Report for Congress (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service), 1.

<sup>24</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 35. According to Abrahamian, the vital tie between bazaarist and ulema, which has lasted in to contemporary age can be traced back to the late nineteen century.

December 1906.<sup>25</sup> The 1906 Iranian Constitution guaranteed several new democratic individual rights to Iranian people, including freedom of speech and of the press. The constitution also granted equal rights among individuals. Additionally, the Iranian Parliament (*Majles*) was given the authority to approve or veto monarchical activities, including when the monarch desired to sign a treaty or request a loan from another government.<sup>26</sup> The democratically elected new *Majles* adopted an imperial foreign policy *vis-à-vis* the great powers under the banner of “neither East nor West” (*na sharq na gharb*).

However, the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, which had started with great expectations and with the promises of the “dawn of a new era,” the “gateway to a bright future,” and the “reawakening of an ancient civilization” eventually failed to achieve its goals.<sup>27</sup> On the contrary, it dragged the country to the edge of disintegration instead. As the Great Game continued in the early part of the twentieth century between Russia and Great Britain, Iran became another pawn in the match. As such, in 1907, the two superpowers *du jour* partitioned Persia into northern and southern spheres of influence. The northern part belonged to Russia while Great Britain took the south. At no point did Persia take part in nor even have awareness of these political negotiations.<sup>28</sup> Besides its territorial losses, Persians also lost their political and economic independence. Persia became another piece of collateral with which the Great Powers could play in the great game, generating acute feelings of national dishonor among Iranians.<sup>29</sup>

Likewise, the isolationist and impartial foreign policy, adopted by the Iranian government, rejecting the Western and Eastern powers’ hegemonic tendencies, resulted in a military coup plotted by the British in 1921 that was aimed at Iranian regime change. The coup brought “pro-Western” and “anti-communist” Reza Khan (later Reza Shah

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<sup>25</sup> Katzman, *Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses (June 11, 2010)*, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Kinzer, *Reset: Iran, Turkey, and America's Future* (New York: Times Books, 2010), 3.

<sup>27</sup> Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 34.

<sup>28</sup> Kinzer, *Reset*, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Hunter, *Iran and the World*, 8.

Pahlavi) into power in 1921 as founder of the Pahlavi Dynasty. Under Reza Shah's reign, Iran became increasingly subject to British political and economic influence.<sup>30</sup>

Following the nineteenth century territorial losses, the twentieth century oil exploitation by foreign powers created constant humiliation strongly resented by Iranians. In 1901, Persia granted British subject William D'Arcy a sixty-year concession for oil throughout the country, except for the five northern providences bordering Russia, in return for a 16 percent share of any oil profits. Immediately after the first oil exploration in Iran, The Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) was founded in 1909. The British government's decision to make structural changes in vessels, converting them from coal-burning to oil-burning, in 1912 made the newly-discovered Persian oil sources crucial for the British marine trade and naval power on the eve of the World War I. In 1914, the British government bought a 51 percent share of the APOC, which gave the British overall control of Iranian oil. The APOC (later known as AIOC, or the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company) grew rapidly and became the fifth largest oil producer in the world within a short time.

The British Imperial Bank of Persia (BIBP) was another significant concession granted to the British by Qajars in 1885. The BIBP, with its monopoly rights over banknotes, and the AIOC, with its enormous financial power, became the twin pillars of British economic and political influence over Iran during the first half of the twentieth century. Many Iranians perceived the power and influence wielded by the AIOC and the BIBP as an affront to their country and their national pride and dignity. From the Iranian perspective, both British organizations operated in a colonial manner. Many Iranians believed that AIOC was underreporting its profits in order to pay smaller profit shares to the Iranian government.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Iranians also believed the AIOC was using an unfair taxation system, favoring the British government, and was selling oil to the British at reduced prices. Moreover, by exporting cheap labor from India, the AIOC further fueled

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<sup>30</sup> Tarock, *Iran's Foreign Policy since 1990*, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, 52.

the anger not only of nationalists, but of the entire population. Local Iranians working for the AIOC found themselves laboring in unconscionable working conditions and lived in shantytowns (*paper city*) without electricity or running water.<sup>32</sup>

In reality, the living conditions of many Iranians was not that much different than those who worked for the AIOC. The oil revenue had little effect on Iran's economy as well as the average Iranian's standard of living. The oil sector, one of the largest in the world, reinforced the British economy and military power rather than improve Iranian socioeconomic life. During the 1930s, Reza Shah attempted to regulate the Iranian tax system, orchestrate a new deal with the AIOC and insulate Iran against foreign manipulation. However, the British had such significant influence, both on the Shah and on the *Majles* decisions that Reza Shah eventually failed to achieve his goals.

World War II worsened Iran's situation both economically and politically. At the beginning of the war, Reza Shah's relationship with Germany was relatively positive. The Shah perceived Germany as a third-party power that would be able to ensure Iranian freedom from both Russian and British dominance. However, this underestimated Russian and British power, which resulted in a British and Russian invasion of Iran and ended Reza Shah's rule in 1941, demonstrating the influence and impact foreign powers had on Iranian domestic politics.<sup>33</sup> In 1941, once again, foreign powers directly played a role in Iranian domestic affairs by overthrowing Shah Reza Pahlavi. The new incumbent of Iran's Peacock Throne became Mohammed Reza, a Shah who was more appropriate to the aims and goals of the Great Powers.

During the interwar period, the British and Russian governments increased their control over Iranian domestic affairs. Allied powers monopolized roads, railroads and vehicles, and utilized Iranian manpower, equipment and structures for their own needs without demonstrating any consideration for the welfare of local Iranians. More importantly, however, Soviet Russia assisted Marxist groups in Iran, particularly *Tudeh* party's (Party of the Masses of Iran) leaders, who had been jailed by Reza Shah. Moscow

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<sup>32</sup> Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, 52.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

employed the *Tudeh* party to induce separatist sentiment among Iran's Kurdish and Azeri people in order to implement its communist ideology and maintain control over northern Iran as well as to obtain oil concessions. Moreover, Russia maintained its military presence even after the war by violating the Tehran Declaration signed by Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin in 1943. Soviet hegemonic and disruptive attitudes caused political upheavals and instability in Iran.

The failure of the Shah to deal with the unfair strategies of the AIOC as well as other Iranian economic challenges, in addition to the political instability in the country, resulted in the formation of a broad nationalist coalition—the National Front—under the leadership of Dr. Muhammad Mosaddeq in 1949. The National Front was embraced by almost every faction of society, including the new middle class (liberal reformists), the traditional middle class (the *ulema* and *bazarist*), as well as socialists and nationalists who belonged to different religious sects. The National Front consolidated its power via the stimulus generated from anti-Shah sentiments arising from the Pahlavi dynasty's weak governance and xenophobic feelings, largely originating from resentment of foreign exploitation.<sup>34</sup>

The main political goals of Mohammad Mosaddeq and the National Front were to establish and extend a constitutional and democratic government as well as to eliminate subversion of foreign interests by the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry, which had been under British control since 1914.<sup>35</sup> The rising popularity of Mosaddeq among Iranian society, in addition to nationalist-flavored public demonstrations eventually vectored the *Majles* toward a pro-Mosaddeq position.<sup>36</sup> In 1951, Mosaddeq was elected

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<sup>34</sup> Roger M. Savory, "Religious Dogma and the Economic and Political Imperatives of Iranian Foreign Policy," in *Iran at the Crossroads: Global Relations in a Turbulent Decade*, 1–35 (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1990), 46.

<sup>35</sup> Homa Katouzian, "Mosaddeq's Government in Iran History: Arbitrary Rule, Democracy, and the 1953 Coup," in *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran*, 1–26 (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 4.

<sup>36</sup> Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (London: Yale University Press, 2003), 124.

as the new prime minister of Iran by gaining the greater majority of the *Majles* votes. Notably, during the Pahlavi dynasty, Mosaddeq was the only democratically elected prime minister over the course of almost six decades.<sup>37</sup>

The Mosaddeq government adopted a new foreign policy referred to as “negative equilibrium policy”—or *Siyasata Movazehene Manfi*. This style of foreign policy preferred termination of concessions already given to one party (such as the termination of British concessions)—rather than ensure new concessions to other parties (such as Russia and the United States)—in order to ensure a balance between super powers that conducted foreign relations with Iran. In accordance with this negative equilibrium policy, British oil concessions had to end. As Chubin and Zabih noted, Iran’s new government believed that “the Soviet danger could be dealt with in the context of the Cold War; British influence could not.”<sup>38</sup> Mosaddeq believed the only way to decrease British economic influence was by nationalizing the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. In order to achieve this, Prime Minister Mosaddeq put the nationalization of Iranian oil to the *Majles* vote. The bill, the Law of Repossession (*khal’-e yad*,) was passed by the *Majles* in March 1951. Two days later, Mohammed Reza Shah was thus compelled—somewhat reluctantly—to sign this into law.<sup>39</sup>

These successful nationalist foreign policy implications enacted by Mosaddeq’s government undermined not only British economic and political domination, they also damaged Russian and American interests in the region. On top of this, the democratic and liberalist domestic politics of the Mosaddeq administration in partisan political circles generated rising resentments among both the Left, such as the *Tudeh*, and the Right (conservative) political parties. Hence, both external and internal power centers launched open as well as hidden political campaigns intending to bring down Mosaddeq’s government and eliminate its political force. These power centers, particularly Britain

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<sup>37</sup> Manoucheh Dorraj and Hamid Zangeneh, “Missed Opportunities and Political Blunders: The Tale of US-Iran Relations,” in *Handbook of US-Middle East Relations: Formative Factors and Regional Perspectives*, 484-501 (New York: Routledge, 2009), 486.

<sup>38</sup> Shahram Chubin and Sepehr Zabih, *The Foreign Relations of Iran* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974), 2.

<sup>39</sup> Katouzian, “Mosaddeq’s Government in Iran History,” 4.

and the United States, eventually achieved their goals and, in turn, helped to cause the collapse of the Mosaddeq regime in August 1953. This incident ended the first phase of Iranian foreign policy and initiated a new era in Tehran's international relations following a more pro-Western trajectory.<sup>40</sup>

The overthrow of the Mosaddeq government left a blackdark mark on Iranian domestic and international affairs. More than five decades later, the Iranian perception of these events continues to have a significant effect on Iran's international orientation as well as on its own domestic issues.<sup>41</sup>

### **C. RESENTMENT OF TO EXTERNAL MEDDLING: THE UNITED STATES**

Between 1906 and 1953, the interactions of the United States and Iran were constructive for both sides, especially for Iran. The first considerable contact between the two countries occurred via the "Iranian Constitutional Revolution" between 1905 and 1908. Many Americans, such as Howard Conklin Baskerville, an American teacher in a Christian religious school in Tabriz, Iran, who died fighting for Iranian democracy and liberalization, supported the constitutionalism and democracy movements in Persia. Baskerville's support and stimulus had a significant impact on materializing the 1906 revolution. As a result, the first steps towards democratization—the establishment of the *Majlis* and the legalization of electoral system—were made with the help of American support to Iran.

Additionally, the United States played a critical role for Iranians at the end of World War II by putting an end to the Russian pressures and interventions imposed on Iran. In December 1943, the 'big three'—Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin—met in Tehran, which resulted in the penning of the Tehran Declaration. During this meeting, the three superpower leaders all recognized that the war caused unique economic difficulties for Iran. Secondly, these leaders promised to preserve Iran's unity and independence and to promote Iranian development. Third, they also affirmed to

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<sup>40</sup> Chubin and Zabih, *The Foreign Relations of Iran*, 3.

<sup>41</sup> Limbert, *Negotiating with Iran*, 60.



withdraw all of their troops from Iran within six months of the end of the war.<sup>42</sup> This last article also stated in the Potsdam Conference Declaration in 1946: “all Allied troops must be withdrawn from Tehran right away.”<sup>43</sup> The Russian government, however, violated both declarations and acted independently. Immediately after the Potsdam Conference, the Soviet press launched a massive campaign against Iran, supporting the creation of separate Azerbaijani and Kurdish states. Russia’s further actions later posed a threat to Iranian sovereignty. It then fell to the United States to solve the problem.<sup>44</sup> With the help of the Truman administration’s deterrent policy against Russia, the Iranian government purged Russian troops and the communist ideology out of Iran. Furthermore, the U.S. government adhered to the Tehran Declaration established at their original meeting and offered \$7.8 million in lend-lease assistance to Iran.<sup>45</sup>

During World War II, the United States continued assisting Iran. However, American’s good intentions—but mixed implementation of political, economical, and military aid—created a negative impact on the Iranian people.<sup>46</sup> Negative feelings toward the U.S. government’s policies increased further when it became known that the U.S. was heavily involved in the 1953 overthrow<sup>47</sup> of Iran’s democratically elected nationalist Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq. Mosaddeq had been well known as an elder statesman in Iranian politics with a long record of opposing both the Pahlavi Dynasty and the foreign oil companies.<sup>48</sup> As a result of the U.S. actions taken to facilitate regime

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<sup>42</sup> Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, 42.

<sup>43</sup> Yonah Alexander and Allan Nanes, *The United States and Iran: A Documentary History* (Frederick, Md. : University Publication of America, 1980), 143.

<sup>44</sup> Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, 45.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>47</sup> Please see for statements of Former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright (Jonathan Mann, *CNN Transcripts*. April 19, 2000. [http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/000419/i\\_ins.00.html](http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/000419/i_ins.00.html) (accessed February 25, 2009)).

<sup>48</sup> Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, 42. Nikki R. Keddie and Yann Richard, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 145.

change in domestic Iranian politics, the U.S. government's reputation among Iranians became sullied. The United States went in short order from being an ally of Iran to Tehran's enemy.<sup>49</sup>

The consequences of the 1953 'CIA-supported coup' changed postwar Iran's situation in several basic ways. First, the United States took the place of the British and Russians as the dominant superpower in Iran, becoming the leading foreign power both economically and politically in Iran. Secondly, earlier hopes that the United States might help in supporting a more democratic government in Iran declined. Third, the pro-Western Mohammed Reza Shah was increasingly prepared to engage in repressive and dictatorial acts. The 'CIA and *Mossad*-backed SAVAK', an Iranian domestic security and intelligent service began its repressive operations—including murdering, jailing and torturing—quickly becoming a nightmare for the anti-Shah people.<sup>50</sup> Last but not least, although the Shah showed a growing interest in modernizing Iran's economy and society, especially in the late 1960s to mid-1970s, his desire to have a militarily strong Iran, coupled with fewer economic resources, increased Iran's economic dependence on the West and heightened the disparity between Iran's elite and public.<sup>51</sup> The Shah's repressive and autocratic rule and American support for over twenty-five years of the Shah's dictatorship, fuelled anti-Shah and anti-American (government) feelings among the public.<sup>52</sup> As a result, under the charismatic leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, masses of people launched an opposition movement against the Shah and the West. This movement ultimately toppled the Shah of Iran in 1979 and established a religious-based, xenophobic and aggressive regime in Iran.

The American hostage crisis in Iran, which had occurred immediately after the Islamic Revolution in November 1979, and spurred by Iranian leftist students in retaliation for the overthrow of Mosaddeq, was the first spark of the still-unnamed war

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<sup>49</sup> Limbert, *Negotiating with Iran*, 60.

<sup>50</sup> Please see for oppressive operations of SAVAK: Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development*. (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1979), 78-90.

<sup>51</sup> Keddie and Richard, *Roots of Revolution*, 148–149.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 142–145.

between the United States and Iran. Many Iranians justified the U.S. embassy's seizure as a rational act. The logic used to validate the act dated back to 1953 and the ensuing five-plus decades of oppression.<sup>53</sup> The embassy seizure served a political purpose and excused Iran's actions as self-defense. As such, given this logic, U.S. retaliation would be needless and unprovoked.<sup>54</sup> However, Washington's response was harsh. The Reagan administration violated the Algiers Accords, signed by both the United States and Iran on January 19, 1981, to resolve the hostage crisis, and imposed economic sanctions on Iran—many of which are still in effect—as a response to the U.S. embassy seizure.<sup>55</sup>

While this 444-day pivotal episode altered American perceptions and strategies toward Iran, the events experienced during and after the 1953 coup had generated even greater Iranian opposition against the West and Western ideas.<sup>56</sup> Resentment toward U.S. foreign policies further increased throughout the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988). Reactions toward Saddam Hussein's September 1980 invasion by the international community were unexpected by Iran. The U.S.' support for Iraq during the war made matters worse. An invasion of Iran by Iraq, Tehran believed, would only materialize if prompted and encouraged by Washington.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, the negative American sentiment in Iran, which began with the overthrow of Mosaddeq, gradually increased during the Mohammed Shah period and reached its climax throughout the interwar period.

#### **D. THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGION ON IRANIAN POLITICS: THE CONCEPTS OF *ITHNA ASHARI SHI'ISM***

Throughout Iran's history, religion has always been an important part of Iranian social and political life. As Limbert noted, "The Achaemenian kings associated themselves with the Iranian god Ahura Macda and with the gods of their many subject

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<sup>53</sup> Ali M. Ansari, *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Next Great Crisis in the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 94.

<sup>54</sup> Ansari, *Confronting Iran*, 97.

<sup>55</sup> *Algiers Accord*. January 19, 1981. [http://www.parstimes.com/history/algiers\\_accords.pdf](http://www.parstimes.com/history/algiers_accords.pdf) (accessed February 27, 2009).

<sup>56</sup> Stephen Kinzer, "Smithsonian." *Inside Iran's Fury*. October 2008. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/people-places/iran-fury.html> (accessed February 21, 2009).

<sup>57</sup> Ansari, *Confronting Iran*, 98.

peoples. In the third century the Sassanians established Zoroastrianism as their state religion.”<sup>58</sup> However, it was not until the Safavids, in 1501, when a majority of the people who lived on the Iranian plateau converted to *Ashari Shia Islam*, that religious ideology played a much greater role in Iranian political and social discourse. From the Safavids period to modern-day Iran, Shi’a Islam and its religio-political traditions and culture have continuously been the centers of Iranian social and political life and even forms individual characteristics such as speech patterns, professional relations and family life.<sup>59</sup>

The faith of Shi’a Islam, particularly the concept of leadership (the *imamate*), the concept of the position of a *Mujtahid* (Islamic scholar), the concept of martyrdom and of the legitimate character of self-sacrifice (the Kerbela-motif),<sup>60</sup> the doctrine of non-cooperation with oppression and non-participation in oppressive government as well as Islamic unity and brotherhood between Muslims, has been transformed into political discourse and activities in Iran. For more than three centuries, these notable doctrines of the Shi’a have significantly shaped customary and widespread Iranian beliefs regarding their own historical foundations, social structures, cultural norms and political narratives and continue to do so this day.

Characteristics of the Shi’a faith derived from these events include martyrdom, self-sacrifice, chivalry, loyalty, faith, return of a savior, elimination of injustices and strong devotion to the Prophet’s family, among others. These pieces are only a small part of the larger Shi’a story in Iran. However, it is these same pieces that feed the everyday lives and discourses of the Iranian people at all levels. Master storytellers, leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran, including Ayatollah Khomeini as well as local Friday prayer guides, transformed these historical narratives into potent political ideological frameworks from which to chronicle new accounts of how Iranian life should be in Iran after the Islamic Revolution in the late 1970s. The new political leaders of Iran used

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<sup>58</sup> Limbert, *Negotiating with Iran*, 25.

<sup>59</sup> Juan Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War: The Politics, Culture and History of Shi'ite Islam* (New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002).

<sup>60</sup> Ramakrishnan, *US Perseption of Iran*, 17.

symbols in the form of people to motivate the Iranian people. Mohammed Reza Shah, the last shah of Iran before the Iranian Revolution, came to symbolize a *taghut*, a modern-day idolatrous pharaoh who rejected Allah's will and His commands. The *Mojaheddin-e Khalq*, a leftist opposition organization, was denounced as *Monafequin*. The *Monafequin* was a group in the seventh century who covertly sought to undermine the Prophet's mission, although they pretended to support him along the way. And Saddam Hussein became a symbol for the hated *Yazid* who had killed Imam Husain, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed.<sup>61</sup>

Shi'a believes that the twelfth imam—referred to by various names, including the Lord of the Age, the *Mahdi*, and the Hidden Imam, among others—will return to earth at the end of the world and transform it from the unjust and corrupt society it had become and return justice, harmony and equality to the people. In the same vein of thought, Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution, appeared to believe strongly in the ideology of justice and of fighting against oppressors. Justice was a powerful tenet in not only Persian nationalism, but also Islamic jurisprudence and particularly Shi'a faith. Khomeini was opposed to despotism, imperialism and corruption. He spoke vehemently against monarchical absolutism in Iran and, on a grander scale, against tyranny across the Islamic realm, thus appealing not only to his Iranian brothers, but also his Muslim counterparts outside Iran's geographic limits.<sup>62</sup>

Khomeini's attitude toward the West, like many revolutionary Iranian leaders, was shaped in large part by his life experiences and encounters with Western governments and their unjust policy implementations toward Iran. He observed, over the course of his life, Iran's occupation by foreign governments and militaries, a U.S.-sponsored military coup in the early 1950s ending Iran's attempts to reclaim its national oil wealth, religious uprisings being crushed in the early 1960s, and ultimately, his own expulsion from Iran. Khomeini believed that the Shah was essentially a puppet of the

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<sup>61</sup> Limbert, *Negotiating with Iran*, 28.

<sup>62</sup> Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran*, 12.

Western powers, in particular the United States.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, he devoted his life to fight against the “corrupt” and “oppressive” Shah Regime and its prolonged supporter, the United States, just like Imam Husain’s revolt against the Omayyad Caliphate of Yazid bin Muawiyah.

The story of Imam Husain, son of Ali and grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, and his martyrdom at Karbala after the revolt, Yazid continues to be a significant part of genuine Shi’a core cultural beliefs and Khomeini’s practices. As such, the commemoration of Husain’s martyrdom has remained a constant part of Shi’a religious customs for centuries. In the modern era, the story of Imam Husain’s sacrifice has been embraced by major political discourses and similar activities.<sup>64</sup>

The martyrdom of Imam Husain was believed, by Khomeini, to be more than a story of suffering. It was not seen as a mere ritualistic, traditional, annual display, but instead as an act of constant defiance and rebellion. Khomeini’s version of the Husain story became analogous to Iran’s relationship with the U.S. and U.S. proxies. Husain symbolized Iran. The murderer of Iran, figuratively, in this reinterpretation of the narrative, became, in essence, the United States and its affiliated supporters.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 19.

<sup>64</sup> Ramakrishnan, *US Perseption of Iran*, 17.

<sup>65</sup> Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution*, 22.

### **III. REASSESSING THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY AND POWER PROJECTION: A THREAT TO GLOBAL SECURITY, OR A CHALLENGE TO THE U.S. AND ITS ALLIES?**

In this chapter, we will argue that although the Islamic Republic of Iran challenges the U.S. national interest in the region, it is not a threat to global security. Although the consideration and attention given in scholarly literature toward the extent of challenges posed by Iran towards the United States and its allies demonstrates diversity, many politicians and scholars, in fact, share parallel ideas regarding four major issues including Iran's nuclear ambitions, its support for particular terrorist organization, its efforts to undermine the Middle East peace and Iraqi state-building processes, and finally, its efforts to subvert Gulf monarchies.<sup>66</sup>

The question of whether the Islamic Republic of Iran—particularly its nuclear agenda—actually poses a threat to global security is still a subject of intense debates in the literature. Indeed, the debate regarding Iran's challenges generally emerges from the motivations behind Iranian foreign policy-makers and the projected future trends in Iranian strategy. Is Iran an ideologically driven irrational state or can it be argued that Iran is, in fact, the model of a truly pragmatic rational state? On one hand, by considering Iran's radical Islamic transformation since the 1979 Iranian Islamic revolution, and by emphasizing its desire to export revolutionary ideas via irrational methods—such as supporting insurgency groups and trying to subvert Gulf monarchies—as well as regime leaders' provocative rhetoric related to Israel, refusal to recognize the Holocaust, and

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<sup>66</sup> Bahgat, "Iran and the United States: Reconcilable Differences?" Burns, "U.S. Policy Toward Iran." Wehrey, et al. *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent*. United States, *Recognizing Iran as a Strategic Threat an Intelligence Challenge for the United States : Staff Report of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Subcommittee on Intelligence Policy*. Washington, DC: U.S. House of Representatives, 2006.

territorial claims in the Persian Gulf neighborhood, some experts assert that Iran has an ideologically driven and expansionist foreign agenda. Therefore, they consider Iran to be a threat to global security.<sup>67</sup>

Along the same thought vein, some scholars maintain it is clerical factionalism coupled with the messianic appearance of Tehran's Shi'a ideological framework that ensures Iranian and affiliated religious leaders are unaffected by and almost protected from the traditional international acceptable norms.<sup>68</sup>

Charles Krauthammner, for instance, claims, "Iran and its nuclear program pose a life-or-death threat to Israel." By emphasizing Tehran's anti-Semitic rhetoric—essentially its call for Israel to be wiped off the map—and by characterizing Iran's President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as an irrational leader who believes in the messianic return and the coming of the apocalypse in the not-too-distant future, Krauthammner asserts that "Iran is very difficult to deter with threat of retaliation, since its leaders may see a nuclear war as helping to hasten the end and to bring the Islamic messiah back more quickly."<sup>69</sup> For this reason, according to Krauthammner, Iran's nuclear agenda is a serious challenge to global security and Iran should be prevented from the acquisition of nuclear weapons.

On the other hand, although successes of the supreme leader of Islamic Revolution, Ruhollah Moosavi Khomeini, can find their foundational cornerstones in Shi'ite dogma and traditions, along with the widespread and far-reaching institutional religious presence throughout Iran<sup>70</sup>, many scholars argue that Iran's foreign policy, particularly over the last two decades, is not simply a matter of religious ideology (to export revolution,) but also of internal domestic—to ensure survival of the regime—and

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<sup>67</sup> Ilan Berham, *Tehran Rising: Iran's Challenge to the United States* (New York: Rowman&Littlefield, 2005). Michael A. Ledeen, *Accomplice to Evil*. Michael A. Ledeen, "Iran Is a Major Threat to Global Security," in *Is Iran a Threat to Global Security*, 16-15 (New York: Greenhaven Press, 2006).

<sup>68</sup> Wehrey, et al., *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent*, 8.

<sup>69</sup> Charles Krauthammer, "Iran's Nuclear Program Is a Serious Threat to Israel," in *Is Iran a Threat to Global Security?*, 20-23 (New York: Greenhaven Press), 206.

<sup>70</sup> Farhad Kazemi, "Review: Models of Iranian Politics, the Road to the Islamic Revolution, and the Challenge of Civil Society," *World Politics* 47, no.4 (July 1995), 556.



international external variables—to impede foreign meddling and attack.<sup>71</sup> For example, according to R.K. Ramazani, a more detailed, comprehensive analysis of Iranian rhetoric and actions crystallizes the fact that Tehran’s foreign policy is solidly built upon the demonstrated interface of both domestic issues, beyond simple factional politics, and the external actors and influences inherent in the international environment that have deliberate and sometimes unintended consequences shapes Iranian foreign policymakers’ decisions.<sup>72</sup>

According to adherents of this claim, Iran is, in fact, not the international anomaly many attempt to paint it. Iran’s decision makers, much like the United States and other influential world players in the global arena, have adopted and implemented a *realpolitik* framework since Khomeini’s death. Similar to many other nations, Iran’s decisions are seen by contemporary scholars as a matter of pragmatic responses to the newly emerging global system and the threats therein. Even more recent interpretations of Iran’s nuclear ambitions, for example, are viewed as pragmatic, practical reactions that aid it with facilitating typical national security goals, such as regime maintenance and survival, as well as nuclear deterrence and a demonstrated ability to protect itself if necessary.<sup>73</sup>

Chapter III, therefore, addresses the domestic and foreign policy drivers of Iran from the onset of the Islamic Republic. This chapter also analyzes Iranian worldviews and affiliated threat perceptions, emphasizing the associated pragmatic ideological structures. The latter portion of this chapter underscores the preeminent themes interwoven throughout Iranian regional strategy. Four key tenets include deterrence, pan-Islamism, proxy group support, and solicitation of and appeal to a pan-Arab populace’s public opinion. At first blush, this may seem ideologically driven and expansionist; however, when viewed through a different lens, these themes underline a broad-based, layered homeland defense strategy.

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<sup>71</sup> Takeyh, *Hidden Iran*. Tarock, *Iran's Foreign Policy since 1990*. R.K. Ramazani, “Iran’s Foreign Policy: Contending Orientation,” *Middle East Journal*, 43 no.2 (Spring 1989): 202–217.

<sup>72</sup> Ramazani, “Iran’s Foreign Policy: Contending Orientation,” 202.

<sup>73</sup> Wehrey, et al., *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent*, 9. Ray Takeyh, “Iran Is Not a Major Threat to Global Security,” in *Is Iran a Threat to Global Security*, 16–19 (New York: Greenhaven Press, 2006).

## **A. THE CHANGING CONCEPT OF THE IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY—FROM RELIGIOUS IDEOLOGY TO PRAGMATISM**

Similar to many other countries, interlinked external and internal values, such as cultural, national and historical elements as well as economic interests, determine Iran's foreign policy. Generally, Iran's foreign policy merges and unites various pieces of religious nationalism and politico-economic pragmatism to forward and pursue Iranian national interests.<sup>74</sup>

As described in a Rand Corporation (2009) study, the Islamic government's foreign policy, in general, was not built only on religious ideology and/or expansionism; pragmatism, factionalism and deterrence constitute major premises of the Republic's foreign and domestic decision-making progress. According to this study "Iranian behavior has been characterized by *realpolitik*. [...] Iran's nuclear ambitious and even its support for terrorism is seen as serving more-pragmatic goals related to regime survival and deterrence."<sup>75</sup> In this context, the latter part of this chapter analyses the transformation of Tehran's foreign and domestic politics—from ideology-based dogmas to pragmatic, national interest-based *realpolitik*—considered from a historical frame of reference.

### **1. Ayatollah Khomeini and a Religious Ideology-Based Foreign Policy**

When Khomeini appointed Mehdi Bazargan, a leader often characterized as secular, nationalist, and democratic, as the provisional prime minister of the Islamic Republic on February 5, 1979, the first priority of his government was to terminate the subservient *de facto* alliance of the shah's regime with the United States and, in short, place the relations of the two countries on a plane of "equality." Bazargan adopted a nonalignment policy on the basis of "equilibrium" aimed at maintaining Iran's independence vis-à-vis the United States and other great powers. Bazargan maintained that his movement, the Iran Liberation Front, was a bridge between the secular National Front and the religious movement led by Khomeini. However, the seizure of the U.S.

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<sup>74</sup> Tarock, *Iran's Foreign Policy since 1990*, 38.

<sup>75</sup> Wehrey, et al., *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent*, 9.

embassy on November 4, 1979, and the 444-day hostage dispute set the stage for a new, idealistic revolutionary foreign policy setting Iran against the rest of the world, and causing resentment and isolation toward Iran. Khomeini's new, idealistic revolutionary foreign policy (religious ideology) challenged and confronted Bazargan's liberal movement. Therefore, Bazargan and his ministers resigned by Khomeini in November 1979, following the U.S. hostage crisis. The end of the Bazargan administration diminished hopes and opportunities for the creation of a liberal democracy in Iran decreased.<sup>76</sup>

Khomeini's endorsement of the U.S. embassy seizure, in essence, became the cornerstone and set the tone and future foundation for the isolated and xenophobic foreign policy of Iran. Khomeini's overriding goal, in terms of domestic politics, was to form a state governed by Islamic norms—a *faqih*-ruled Iran—whose ultimate aim was to export the 'Islamic Revolution' to the rest of the world. According to Khomeini, "Islam is not peculiar to a country, even the Muslims. Islam comes for humanity. Islam wishes to bring all humanity under the umbrella of justice."<sup>77</sup> Moreover, Khomeini believed monarchies should not exist and are against Allah's (God's) wishes due to their injustice and oppressive ruling system. "We have no choice but to destroy those systems that are corrupt and to overthrow all oppressive and criminal regimes,"<sup>78</sup> affirmed Khomeini. As a result of Khomeini's confrontational foreign policy, Iran was left with only one major ally remaining in the Middle East, Syria. All other Middle Eastern countries perceived Iran's crusade to export the Islamic Revolution as a threat to their own national interests. Moreover, Khomeini's expansionist strategy, coupled with Iran's proxy groups' anti-Western demonstrations, and militant activities, such as the suicide bombings of the U.S. and French forces in Lebanon in 1983, and the holding of American, British, French, and German hostages in Lebanon, further isolated the Islamic Republic. Iran's idealistic

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<sup>76</sup> Ramazani, "Iran's Foreign Policy," 204,205.

<sup>77</sup> Quoted in Ramazani, "Iran's Foreign Policy," 208.

<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution*, 18.

confrontational foreign policy even undermined Iran's relations with Soviet Russia. As a result, Moscow cut economic ties with Iran. Notably, however, the economic relations of Iran with Soviet Russia did not improve until 1986.<sup>79</sup>

Within the first decade after the Islamic Revolution, Iran staged a confrontation between the revolutionary realists, who supported nationalistic, pragmatic ideas, and the revolutionary idealists, who aimed to override religious norms in state affairs. Khomeini's foreign policy illustrated ideas of both the realists and idealists, although religious-based policies dominated Iranian affairs until his death.

## **2. The Reformist Movement and the Rise of Hardliners**

Iran's isolation from the world and its economic situation required a reorientation toward a more realistic and reformist foreign policy after Khomeini's death in 1989. Iran's foreign policy in the 1990s signified a decided transformation from Khomeini's revolutionary ideologies toward more practical national interests. This approach, in the last decade of the twentieth century, was deemed necessary to secure Iranian national interests in a world that had changed significantly, especially in the past decade.<sup>80</sup>

The changing priorities of Iran's internal and international policies, from revolutionary radicalism to pragmatic power politics, can be better understood by considering the combination of the destructive effects of the Iran-Iraq War along with the insecurity of Iran's isolation by international actors.<sup>81</sup> The prolonged war against Iraq and the economic isolation of Iran, coupled with a dramatic drop in oil revenues through the end of the 1980s, resulted in mounting economic hardships that drove Iran into a social and economic deadlock. In the post-war period, realistic ideas and political pragmatism gained increasing importance, particularly during the presidency of "conservative pragmatist" Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and "reformist" Mohammad Khatami.

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<sup>79</sup> Ramazani, "Iran's Foreign Policy," 210.

<sup>80</sup> Douglass and Hays, *A U.S. Strategy for Iran*, 13.

<sup>81</sup> Takeyh, *Hidden Iran*, 63.

Reconstructing ties became central to Rafsanjani after continued stress and the decline of Iran's international reputation during the Iran-Iraq war under Khomeini. Re-forging ties among Arab neighbors and the newly emerging states of Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan, topped Tehran's political priority list. Additionally, throughout his presidency from 1989 to 1997, Rafsanjani attempted to avoid clashes with the United States and other Western powers. Rafsanjani, who advocated a free-market economy in Iran, struggled to rebuild the war-torn Iranian economy and political structure by pursuing liberal economic rules and good economic relations with the West.

In the period between 1997 and 2005, the successor of Rafsanjani, President Muhammad Khatami, launched a comprehensive revision of Iran's foreign policy, which no other period of the Islamic Republic had experienced. The goal of the Khatami administration was to lift "the walls of mistrust," which had been built between Iran and many Arab states and European countries, despite the natural pull of religious ideology in the Iranian politics, which impeded Khatami's tendencies toward realism. Although Khatami's presidency failed to achieve his goals and lacked ultimate success, his achievements proved momentous internationally. The essence of his reform movement was that democratic accountability at home directed a foreign policy, which respected current norms in the international arena. Khatami's mantra, "Dialogue among Civilizations," was not simply a catchphrase, but rather a genuine belief that détente and cooperation were the best strategies by which to legitimize their rule. Furthermore, during this time, Iran finally achieved a rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and reclaimed its ties with the European Union. For a brief moment in time, it appeared Iran was finally willing to relinquish its revolutionary past and join the international community as a cooperative partner on the world stage.<sup>82</sup>

Impressively, Khatami's presidency and his policies overcame conservative resistance despite U.S. hostilities. Hard-liners who command key agencies of the state worked diligently to subvert Khatami's moderate policies by accusing his administration

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<sup>82</sup> Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution*, 5.

of being an agent of the United States. Simultaneously, Washington, unused to real, lasting changes in Iran, did not understand the actual scope of Khatami's promise. Instead, Washington's punitive policies toward Iran remained unchanged and sanctions and isolation policies remained in place, which, in effect, proved counterproductive in the long run. A policy with more vision, invention and ingenuity by the U.S. could potentially have altered Iran's domestic balance of power favoring the reformers.<sup>83</sup>

In fact, two major events—9/11 and the nuclear crisis—helped breathe new life into and revive the hardliners' platform and energized the momentum behind their campaign. Washington's insistent and consistent animosity toward Tehran in effect paved the way, facilitating the conservative members' ability to malign the reformers by insinuating the reformers were allegedly supporting and enabling U.S. regime change goals for Iran. The international community's decision to deal with Iran's nuclear ambitions via sanctions and external pressures in actuality empowered conservatives, who gained much from this conflict. The reformers then, overwhelmed and exhausted from dealing with domestic political battering and U.S. animosity, would surrender to the rising power of the hardliners.<sup>84</sup> The rise of the new right portended important changes in Iran's foreign affairs. A mixture of Islamist ideology and ultranationalism would condition the new rulers' perspective.

## **B. IRAN'S CURRENT STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND FOREIGN POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The Islamic Republic of Iran has described itself as a major actor for global Islamic enlightenment. Religious ideologues have often declared pan-Islamic posturing since the Islamic Revolution. These religious beliefs were often also translated into foreign policy and had religious-political implications and ramifications. However, Tehran today, is highly aware that no country can survive by persisting in ideologically-based policies alone. Tehran is also aware that the government has to manage its economy and meet the demands of a growing population. It does not mean that Tehran

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<sup>83</sup> Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution*, 5.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

has completely abandoned Khomeini's legacy, which is still retained in Iranian foreign policy. However, Tehran's more immediate goals are, rather than be an Islamic forerunner, to emerge as a hegemonic actor in the Middle East, to ensure regime survival and to lift economic and political isolation by means of more pragmatic and practical strategies. These three aspirations are perhaps realistic, though not necessarily revolutionary ideals. These aims, in essence, are intertwined, and Iran's policies are quite hermetic due to its factionalist structure. In the context of this political turbulence, Iran's political priorities and the courses of actions it chooses in order to materialize these objectives are considered further in the following section.

### **1. Regional and Global Preeminence**

Iranian leadership, including the Pahlavi Dynasty, has traditionally perceived itself as the regional hegemonic power because of Iran's geographic size and its historical accomplishments and successes. The government and leadership of the more nascent Islamic Republic of Iran was no exception. In the early period of the Islamic Republic, Khomeini employed revolutionary radicalism in order to achieve and realize this prolonged desire. Khomeini's selected course of action was to spread his ideology under the banner of, "Neither West nor East but Islam" and to create a *faqih*-ruled Middle East under the spiritual leadership of the Islamic Republic. However, his objective, a *faqih*-ruled world, stayed within the boundaries of Iran. Moreover, some of Khomeini's aggressive foreign policies, including the use of terrorism and the subversion of some Persian Gulf monarchies (many of which were U.S. allies,) provided the foundation for and sped up the process towards Iran's economic and political isolation and negated its intended goal of becoming a global power.<sup>85</sup>

Iranian leaders still look for ways to dominate the region and play more active roles in global issues, but the manner in which they choose to do this has altered. Instead

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<sup>85</sup> Ramazani, "Iran's Foreign Policy."

of using violence to radically reshape the region or attempting to undermine regimes, a greater emphasis on diplomatic measures and state-to-state dialogue has been employed by Iranian officials.<sup>86</sup>

Tehran's struggle to attain regional hegemonic power status has been impacted, perhaps unintentionally, by the U.S.'s objectives in Iraq and Afghanistan, including the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the Taliban regimes (two of Iran's sworn adversaries.) These transitions, often sudden, were predicted to essentially leave a regional power vacuum with the anticipated departure of U.S. troops from these two countries, which Iran planned to use to its advantage. The current Iranian administration, therefore, seeks to encourage the reduction of U.S. troops and influence in the region and to fill itself, the political power vacuum, which many anticipate will remain.

## **2. Regime Survival**

The foremost priority of Tehran today is to preserve regime survival. Independence from the West, particularly from the influence of the United States, constitutes one of the leading objectives of Iranian leaders. The fear of external plots is particularly prevalent within the Iranian political structure and is of concern among Iranian elite and intelligentsia. This is predominantly due in large part to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) and the British Secret Intelligence Service's (MI6) collective efforts toward overthrowing the democratically-elected Iranian nationalist Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq in 1953.

Iranian leaders see a confluence, and often merging of, internal and external threats. In order to sustain legitimacy, Tehran—likewise all revolutionary regimes—often maintains a conspiracy theorist laden viewpoint in which the regime believes others target them deliberately, knowingly and willfully. As such, the current political and bureaucratic elites then consider themselves the proverbial scapegoats and victims of the

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<sup>86</sup> Wehrey, et al., *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent*, 11.



great powers. When their public support begins to falter, Iranian leaders purposefully exploit public opinion by fomenting paranoia in order to reaffirm their regime's legitimacy.<sup>87</sup>

### **3. Overcoming Economic and Political Isolation**

Another objective of Tehran, today, is to overcome the West's, particularly the U.S.'s, political and economic isolation. From Iran's perspective, reducing Western/U.S. pressure on Iran has great importance not only for regime survival, but also for national economic interests and the preservation of Iranian sovereignty. The Ahmedinejad government's effort to solidify political and economic ties with Asian countries is an attempt to compensate its disordered relationships with the West. For example, Iran has increasingly vied to become a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).<sup>88</sup>

As a means to counterbalance the West and restructure political alliances and the overall balance of power, Iran—using the U.S.'s Iraq occupation as its proverbial bait—is attempting to gain closer diplomatic ties with emerging powers such as Russia and China. Should Iran successfully forge positive alliances with these two countries, the strategic aims would be to counter potential encirclement by the West and the Arab world. This reflects a diplomatic re-orientation in Iran's foreign policy since President Ahmendinejad's rise to power. Iran's push for full-member status in the SCO is tailored and crafted intentionally to counterbalance the Western security presence and hegemony of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).<sup>89</sup>

### **C. THE KEY PREMISES OF IRAN'S POWER PROJECTIONS: WHY DOES THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC SUPPORT TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS?**

In the turbulence of Iranian politics, exercising terrorism as a means of political explanation is not a new phenomenon since the Islamic Revolution. "Violence was not only a permissible but also a mandatory response against those seeking to undermine

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<sup>87</sup> Wehrey, et al., *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent*, 8.

<sup>88</sup> Frederic Wehrey, et al., *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent*, 13.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 14.

God's republic," Takeyh states in his book.<sup>90</sup> The Ahmedinejad administration, as did its predecessor, promotes paramilitary activities and employs terrorism to achieve the Islamic Republic's strategic objectives.

There are several reasons that can explain Iran's support for militant groups. These reasons may be seen as a part of the Islamic Republic's power projection, as a means to gain Arab public sympathy, and as a way to reduce U.S. influence and exert pressure on unfriendly regimes in the region. State-centric geopolitical objectives are central to Iran's support of terrorism and insurgent groups, especially in the Levant. Iran purposefully and intentionally exploits the Arab-Israeli dispute in the hopes of creating dissonance and dividing the U.S. from its U.S.-friendly Arab regimes. This wedge would ideally, effectively generate a pseudo-forward defense posture and help provide insurance against a potential U.S. invasion of Iran.<sup>91</sup>

The Islamic Republic's support for Hezbollah, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hamas, for instance, provides the Iranian regime with great dividends with its Arab brethren. Iran's support of these terrorist organizations buys Iran significant figurative legitimacy and credibility with the Arab community *writ large*, many of whom are dissatisfied with what they consider a complacent, status quo ideological operational framework by their largely authoritarian, gerontocratic regimes.<sup>92</sup>

Tehran uses terrorist organizations as a driving force for political influence. These organizations and paramilitaries can effect and wield significant pressure on regional governments that are not sympathetic to Iranian interests at crucial junctures. Perhaps of even greater import, however, is that Tehran's support of these terrorist organizations provides Iran with a response capacity aimed at countering U.S. and U.S.-allied regimes in its neighborhood, should the need arise.

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<sup>90</sup> Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution*, 225.

<sup>91</sup> Frederic Wehrey, et al., *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent*, 7-8.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

Iran's military support of Shi'ite militants serves as yet another important strategic foreign policy aim. While not aiming to necessarily generate a civil war in the region, Iran intentionally exploits sectarian strife between the Shi'ites and the Sunnis. By empowering, militarily, the local Shi'ites against a perceived threat of the Sunni radicals and militias, Iran intends to undermine the influence and expansion of the Sunni Arab, purposefully attempting to block Saudi Arabia from gaining a political stronghold as a regional leading actor.<sup>93</sup>

Iran's Islamic regime also attempts to undermine the U.S. state-building efforts in Iraq by providing financial and technical assistance as well as spiritual guidance to Shi'ite insurgency groups in Iraq.<sup>94</sup> Iraq remains a central concern to Iran and is an important part of Tehran's foreign policy as it relates to Iranian economic national interests. Critical waterways constitute Iran's most direct link to the international petroleum market and is the lifeblood of its economy. As such, Iran seeks to dominate or at least maintain a voice in Iraqi political affairs with the assistance from, and the Iranian political manipulation of, the Shi'a society in Iraq.

Tehran's desire to acquire nuclear power constitutes another important component of Iran's power projection, deterrence and retaliatory strategy. Should Iran obtain a sovereign, independent nuclear deterrent capability, to Iranian leadership, this holds much significance. Iran believes that with this nuclear capacity, it would not be dominated nor threatened by U.S. conventional military forces. Therefore, Iran could then continue, in earnest, their efforts to end U.S. presence in the Gulf region via the use of militant activities.

#### **D. MISREADING IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY**

The difference between Iranian rhetoric and the reality of their political decisions and policies should be more deeply considered. To some, Iran's policy-makers seem to

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<sup>93</sup> Wehrey, et al., *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent*, 82.

<sup>94</sup> Wehrey, et al., *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent*, 104–109. For further information related the Iranian regime's support for terrorist organizations please see: (Gawdat Bahgat, "Iran and the United States: Reconcilable Differences?" *Iranian Studies* 36, no. 2 (April 2008): 139–154.)

communicate policy via religious rhetoric. In reality, however, their decisions find much logic and are tightly linked with Iran's pragmatic national interests. In short, Iran's policymakers are not making decisions in what some may consider a religious vacuum, nor are the decisions founded on what some associate with irrational, religious beliefs.

Numerous examples demonstrate the practicality underlining the Iranian decision-making process. For example, rather than take a religious stance and support the Muslim Republic of Azerbaijan in its conflict with Christian Armenia, Tehran found it in its own best interests to support Armenia. Iran's support for Armenia was crafted purposefully with the intent to reduce Turkey's growing influence and political strong-hold in the Central Asian arena, an area where Iran has much to lose.

Additionally, Iran's maintenance of neutrality in key conflicts also speaks volumes toward the pragmatism underscoring their foreign policy decisions. Iran elected to retain a neutral posture rather than support their Muslim counterparts in the war between Christian Russia and Muslim Chechnya. Maintaining good relations with Russia remained high on Iran's priority list. Another example of Iran's pragmatic international orientation can be observed in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Here, again, Iran maintained a neutral political disposition although Iraqi Muslims were in conflict with largely Christian military forces. Shifting relations with key regional partners have also drifted toward a more *realpolitik* demeanor. Iran's relations have thawed more recently, for example, with Saudi Arabia, after more than twenty years of harsh ideological and regional clashes with the Kingdom, whom it has now almost befriended.<sup>95</sup>

Iran's role in the international economic arena also shines a light on key decision points where pragmatic realities overtly override religious rhetoric. In 1996, for example, Iran offered to sign a \$1 billion oil contract with U.S. oil company, Conoco. Iran made this offer with the intention of opening dialogue with America, since relations between the two countries had been extraordinarily tense since the Islamic Revolution. However, this practical attempt at a would-be peace offering and partnership was thwarted with U.S. government pressure placed on Conoco to reject the deal. In lieu of Conoco, Iran

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<sup>95</sup> Tarock, *Iran's Foreign Policy since 1990*, .

instead signed with a French oil corporation, Total. These examples specifically demonstrate Iran's political tendencies toward catering to national interests instead of simply religious rhetoric. In fact, in 1988, the founding leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, arguably one of the most religious-oriented leaders, Ayatollah Khomeini demonstrated the growing political pragmatism in Iranian foreign policy in his public statement that "our government has priority over all Islamic tenets, even over prayer, fasting and the pilgrimage to Mecca."<sup>96</sup>

As a result of significant miscalculations regarding Iran's political baseline and intentions, U.S. foreign policy toward Iran has been flawed. This policy toward Iran assumes that Iran arrives at its decisions largely as a result of religious means, when in fact, the reality is that Iranian foreign policy decision makers' choices are largely founded in practical national interests and rational thought rather than some "mad mullahs" making decisions via religious doctrine. Since 1997, when Iranian President Khatami was elected as a reformer who was interested in better relations with the U.S., Washington has altered its basic picture of rigidity toward Iran, although its overall fundamental approach remains that engagement with Iran is still a negative, pointless endeavor.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup>Quoted in Judith Miller, *God has Ninety-Nine Names: Reporting from a Militant Middle East* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 453.

<sup>97</sup> Tarock, *Iran's Foreign Policy since 1990*, 37, 38.

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#### IV. THE UNITED STATES' FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD IRAN

The prolonged Iranian question is, arguably, one of the most salient foreign policy issues topping the United States' agendas today. What is Iran's overall significance to the United States? First, although Iran is not a threat for global security (as argued in the previous chapter), Tehran's power projection, including nuclear enrichment and support for militant groups, as well as its regional ambitions and its traditional inclination to wield regional dominance, defy the United States and its allies in the region as well as undermine the Middle East peace process.<sup>98</sup> Second, Iran's central and geostrategic location between countries—including Afghanistan, Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, the Caucasus and the more recently created Central Asia nations—as well as its enormous continental shelf possession in the Persian Gulf make Iran strategically significant for the United States' in terms of protecting its national interest in the region and its ultimate successes in Iraq and Afghanistan. Finally, considering the growing importance of the Persian Gulf in the world oil market, Iran's significant oil and natural gas reserves—the second largest in the world—mark it as a country of immense strategic importance to the U.S.'s economic and regional interests.

Undoubtedly, creating a more pro-Western—particularly pro-American (similar to the Pahlavi Dynasty period in Iran)—Iran which plays a significant role in protecting Western interests in the Gulf, or at the very least, forming an Iran that is less menacing to U.S. interests appears to frequently be a priority objective of many U.S. foreign policy administrators.

Since the Islamic Revolution, addressing the issue of Iran and the challenge it has continued to pose has been at the crux of numerous policy shifts. Different approaches to deal with the “Iranian problem” have been attempted, seemingly without much success or coming close to the achievement of desired U.S. goals. The last three decades of U.S. foreign policies towards Iran—the intense economic sanctions and political pressure, containment, intimidation and rogue-state rollback—have neither altered the Iranian

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<sup>98</sup> Wehrey, et al. *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent*, 1.

authority's aggressive diplomacy nor achieved regime change. Instead, these foreign policy choices, by arousing nationalist sentiment and revealing a collective sense of discontentment toward American policy among many Iranians, have actually facilitated hardliners in gaining public support. Furthermore, these same policies have also adversely affected U.S. domestic and international political and economic interests.

In his book *Confronting Iran*, Ali Ansari, summarizes the failure of sequential U.S. administrations dealing with Iran and the unintentional consequences of these failures. Ansari calls attention to the “sobering fact that every American President since Islamic revolution has been unable to deal successfully with the question of Iran.”<sup>99</sup> He states that President Carter was arguably the most high-visibility casualty of the interfaces between the United States and Iran. It is widely believed that the result of the Iran hostage crisis from 1971–1981 contributed significantly to his and the Democrats' loss of the presidential elections in 1981 to the Republican Party. The Iran-Contra affair erupted in the mid-1980s, plaguing President Reagan's administration. The deals brokered during what later became a massive scandal were originally intended to promote positive relations between the United States and Iran. However, those efforts failed once public light was shed on secret dealings, which ultimately became publicized as arms-for-hostage scheme, again, not the original intentions of those who initiated the secret plan.

Allegedly clandestine deals with Iran tainted the George H.W. Bush administration as well. When Clinton was elected U.S. President in 1993 and the Democrats were once again at the country's political helm, his original plan of attack was simple avoidance of Iran. However, this failed. Iran would not and could not be disregarded from the political landscape. During Clinton's first term, decisions were forced to be made that pulled him closer to center stage vis-à-vis the Iranian question. The United States' policies toward Iran became part of the ensuing elections. Throughout Clinton's second term as U.S. president, his interface with Iran increased. However, by the end of four years, no significant progress could be determined in dealings with Iran. With the pendulum swinging back across the political spectrum to the Republican Party,

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<sup>99</sup> Ansari, *Confronting Iran*, 2.



and George W. Bush's ascendancy to the presidency and the aftermath of 9/11, neglecting Iran has not been an option. However, no replacement policy toward Iran has yet been formally established.<sup>100</sup>

#### **A. U.S. POLICY FAILURES IN IRAN SINCE THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION**

The major challenge dealing with the Iranian question has been the mutual mistrust and undiplomatic discourse that has typified United States-Iranian relations since the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979. The Islamic revolution also marked the beginning of deadlock and hostility between the two parties, which never lost its vehemence over three decades. Successive U.S. administration officials' characterizations of Iran as a 'rogue' state and their allegations regarding Iran's efforts to acquire WMD and promotion of terrorism worldwide, coupled with the Iranian regime's insolent response toward the U.S. as a retaliatory measure, have comprised some for major reasons of rising animosity between these two nations.<sup>101</sup> These factors, which are the source of mutual hostility between both countries, have also constituted the main determinatives of U.S. and Iran foreign policies, priorities and objectives in the region.

According to Ansari, the main reason for successive U.S. failures in Iran is that the United States, after more than three decades, still lacks a coherent, sound, sustainable foreign policy toward the Islamic Republic.<sup>102</sup> Iran's overall strategic value and significance in the global community *writ large* as a key player in global stability and economic interests makes this U.S. policy vacuum rather remarkable.

Another reason U.S. foreign policy has consistently been unsuccessful with Iran is because the Iranian people have viewed U.S. policies as a threat to their national dignity. This perception increased the support of Iranian hardliners and reduced the influence of reformers in the country, which was incompatible with U.S. foreign policies. Iranians perceived the U.S. as a threat to its nation in several basic ways. First, overall strategies of the U.S. in the Middle East have been designed around controlling Middle East oil

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<sup>100</sup> Ansari, *Confronting Iran*, 2.

<sup>101</sup> Bahgat, "Iran and the United States," 141.

<sup>102</sup> Ansari, *Confronting Iran*, 1.

resources and oil transportation routes. The importance of oil is not only about the profits, which would be yielded to oil companies and their countries; it is also about the global power garnered by those who control the oil. Iran has the third largest oil reserve in the world after Saudi Arabia and Iraq. In 1979, the U.S. and British oil companies owned the most Iranian oil. With the 1979 Islamic revolution, however, the U.S. oil companies were thrown out of Iran. The probability of a U.S. attack on Iran in order to regain control of Iranian oil has been perceived as a threat by the Iranian people. This perception is mainly because of neo-con strategies implemented by the U.S. administration in Iraq and Afghanistan in the wake of September 11.

Second, similar accusations ascribed to Iraq, such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the nuclear ambitions of leaders and support for terrorism, were directed toward Iran. These reproaches have generated skepticism toward future U.S. strategies and policies on Iran. Furthermore, neither the Bush nor the Obama administrations, has ever abandoned a military operation option against Iran as a choice of deterrence. President Barack Obama's administration stated, "the United States reserved all its options, ranging from diplomacy to military action, to pressure Iran over its nuclear program. [...] We must use all elements of our national power to protect our interests as it relates to Iran."<sup>103</sup>

Third, the Iranian state has been the only Shi'a Muslim state in the region and this particular characteristic of Iran has had a tremendous impact on U.S.–Iran relations. Most of the world's petroleum is in the Shi'a parts of the Middle East including Iraq (60 percent Shi'a), Iran (93 percent Shi'a) and the Shi'a part of the Saudi Arabia. The current Iranian administration wants to be a regional superpower. In order to materialize its goal, one of its strategies is the formation of the independent "Shi'a alliance" controlling most of the world's oil specifically under the umbrella of the "Shanghai Cooperation Organization." In the event of this formation, U.S. interests in the region would be undermined. The U.S. administration would most likely employ more severe measures to prevent it from the possibility of losing control of the world's oil.

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<sup>103</sup> Ross Colvin, "Reuters UK." *U.S. Says all Options on the Table to Deal with Iran* (January 29, 2009). <http://uk.reuters.com/article/idUKTRE50S7DI20090129> (accessed March 5, 2009).

All such threat perceptions of the United States by the Iranian people are, in actuality, greatly assisted Ahmadinejad and his hardline government and conservative supporters, while contributing to U.S. policy failures in Iran. Independent, reformist, and democratic movements, as well as oppositional movements, were considered agents and servant policies of the U.S. and other external powers. Furthermore, reformist movements were restricted and suppressed by hardliners. The constant pressure on the reformists and their oppression by the hardliners prevented them from organizing and confronting Ahmadinejad and his supporters more effectively.<sup>104</sup>

## **B. A QUICK GLANCE AT OVERALL U.S. STRATEGIES IN THE REGION**

In scholarly literature, criticisms regarding overall U.S. foreign policy generally focus on the post-Cold War era and newer American foreign policies toward Iran, namely “American militarism”, the “dual-containment policy” and the “rogue state doctrine.”<sup>105</sup>

### **1. American Militarism**

During the 1980s and 1990s, from the Carter through the George W. Bush administrations, the U.S.’ defense and foreign policy gained a ‘*unipolar*’ identity giving the United States the opportunity to reshape the world system to its advantage.<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, under George W. Bush, the unipolar American strategy shifted from hegemonic economic governance to *militarism*, or the pursuit of global hegemony by means of military force.<sup>107</sup>

In order to achieve global hegemony and sustain economic stability at home, the energy-rich Persian Gulf has been implicitly assumed to be the first prerequisite by

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<sup>104</sup> Muhammad Sahimi, *Role of US Militarism in Ahmadinejad’s Rise*. August 14, 2009. <http://original.antiwar.com/sahimi/2009/08/14/role-of-us-militarism-in-ahmadinejads-rise/print> (accessed March 4, 2009).

<sup>105</sup> Ivan Eland, *Putting “Defence” Back into U.S. Defence Policy: Rethinking U.S. Security in the Post-Cold War World*. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001). Philip S. Golub, “Imperial Politics, Imperial Will and the Crisis of US Hegemony.” *Review of International Political Economy* 11 no. 4 (October 2004): 763-786. Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

<sup>106</sup> Golub, “Imperial Politics,” 763.

<sup>107</sup>: Golub, “Imperial Politics,” and Bacevich, the New American Militarism.

several successions of U.S. administrations, both republican and democratic.<sup>108</sup> In order to assure this prerequisite, U.S. administrations opted for military mobilization as the preferred means. Flip S. Golub presents a solid brief of U.S. military intervention progresses in the oil-rich regions: “The U.S. armed forces have swept across Central Asia and the Gulf, occupied Afghanistan and Iraq, and established a dense new network of forward military bases in the strategically sensitive arc stretching from the Gulf to South Asia. At the same time, far from that central theater of operations, hence far from scrutiny, covert military and intelligence operations have been launched.”<sup>109</sup>

Rising U.S. militarism in the neighborhood of energy-rich Iran, the Bush doctrine of preemptive military action against emergent threat states (such as Iran), and keeping military options on the table generated perceptions of an American threat among Iranians.<sup>110</sup> This perception has played a significant role in shaping Iranian decisions in favor of governments pursuing pro-nuclear improvement policies as deterrents against foreign threats.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Bacevich, *The New American Militarism*, 177.

<sup>109</sup> Golub, “Imperial Politics,” 763.

<sup>110</sup> Mary Carioli and Peter F. Trumbore “Rhetoric versus Reality: Rogue States in Interstate Conflict.” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no.5 (October 2005): 772.

<sup>111</sup> A public opinion carried out inside Iran shows that a majority of Iranians supports Ahmadinejad government (63 %) and country’s pursuit of nuclear power (55%) Please See: (Murphy D. Staff, “Most Iranians Support Ahmadinejad and Nuclear Power, Poll Finds.” *The Christian Science Monitor*. September 23, 2009. <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Global-News/2009/0923/most-iranians-support-ahmadinejad-and-nuclear-power-poll-finds> (accessed March 2, 2010).)

The supporters of this idea: Arthur L. Lowrie, *United States policy in the Persian Gulf: Domestic Basis of Containment of Iran* (Annandale, Va: United Association for Studies and Research., 1997). Jahangir Amuzegar, “Iran’s Crumbling Revolution,” *Foreign Affairs* 81, no.1 (January-February 2003):44–57. And Muhammad Sahimi, “Role of US Militarism in Ahmadinejad’s Rise,” August 14, 2009, <http://original.antiwar.com/sahimi/2009/08/14/role-of-us-militarism-in-ahmadinejads-rise/print> (accessed March 4, 2010).

## 2. The Rogue State Doctrine and Dual-Containment Policies

The George H. W. Bush administration used a rogue state doctrine in order to meet the immediate and persistent threat represented by aggressive rogue states, although the assumption of rogue state aggressiveness, whether justified or not, is still a controversial subject in the literature.<sup>112</sup>

As a consequence of rogue state doctrine, the Clinton administration implemented a dual-containment policy pursuing a strategy that sought to isolate Iran, in part by attempting to limit all third-party assistance to the country.<sup>113</sup> Restrictions were tightened in 1995 along with the implementation of the Iran Sanction Act (ISA), originally called the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA).<sup>114</sup>

In addition to American militarism, two U.S. foreign policies—*the rogue state doctrine and the dual containment policy*—have fueled Iranians’ fierce nationalism, characterized by intense suspicions and absolute resentment of foreign influences.<sup>115</sup> Not only ‘conservatives’ but also ‘reformers’ have perceived American foreign policies as meddling with Iranian interior affairs. Hence, governments that pursue anti-American policies, gain high levels of national support, while pro-American governments fail to achieve success even though they follow a more democratic and reformist road. Jahangir Amuzegar’s illustration regarding the rise of Khomeini clearly presents this resentment: “Ayatollah Khomeini climbed to the Peacock Throne not on the wings of Quranic angels but mainly by championing freedom from U.S. interference.”<sup>116</sup>

In this context, the latter part of this chapter will focus on six successive U.S. administrations, from Carter to Obama, and their respective policies and strategies toward the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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<sup>112</sup> Carioli and Trumbore “Rhetoric versus Reality, 773. Robert S. Litwak, “What’s in a Name? The Changing Foreign Policy Lexicon.” *Journal of international Affairs-Colombia University* 54 (2001): 375–394.

<sup>113</sup> Pyneet Talwar, “Iran in the Balance.” *Foreign Affairs* 80, no.4 (July-August 2001): 61.

<sup>114</sup> Kenneth Katzman, *Iran Sanctions Act (ISA) March 9, 2009*, CRS Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service (2009).

<sup>115</sup> Amuzegar, “Iran’s Crumbling Revolution,” 48.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

### C. THE JIMMY CARTER ADMINISTRATION (JANUARY 1977 TO 1981)

While respect for human rights and human dignity constituted the key premises of the Carter administration's domestic and foreign policies, the implication of these policies illustrated that Iran was out of the Carter administration's scope. Ansari emphasizes this point: "Carter's determination to make human rights a central pillar of his foreign policy had scarcely been applied to Iran."<sup>117</sup> In the same vein of thought, Dorraj and Zangeneh note that the Carter administration was "torn between the ideals of America—respect for human rights and human dignity—and the reality of American political and economic interest—thus bowing to the military—industrial complex and approving increasingly more military hardware and assistance to the Shah's regime."<sup>118</sup>

The Carter administration was the major supporter of Iran's Shah, whose desire was to establish an all-powerful regional security and defense capability that emanated from Iran and extended outwards to its Middle Eastern neighborhood. Attempting to create this massive a military and security force, however, proved costly, and adversely impacted Iran's economy significantly. Additionally, during the Carter administration, much like previous U.S. administrations' activities, the CIA provided support, training and equipment to the Shah's secret service—SAVAK—an organization infamously known for brutalities and the oppression of Iranian peoples, particularly those of the revolutionary vanguard opposing the Shah.<sup>119</sup>

From an Iranian perspective, scholars Yazdani and Rizwan both criticized the post-Shah period of the Carter administration's foreign policy implications toward the newly established Islamic Republic. According to these scholars, the major factor behind the U.S. embassy seizure and the hostage crisis in 1980 was the Carter administration's Iranian strategy: "The United States kept on interfering in Iran's internal affairs even after the fall of the Shah, which was one of the major factors for the seizure of the U.S.

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<sup>117</sup> Ansari, *Confronting Iran*, 96.

<sup>118</sup> Manoucheh Dorraj and Hamid Zangeneh, "Missed Opportunities and Political Blunders: The Tale of US-Iran Relations," in *Handbook of US-Middle East Relations: Formative Factors and Regional Perspectives*, 484-501 (New York: Routledge, 2009), 488.

<sup>119</sup> Dorraj and Zangeneh, "Missed Opportunities and Political Blunders," 489.

embassy in Tehran by students opposed to such interference.”<sup>120</sup> As such, the U.S. embassy seizure was ultimately viewed by politicians and Iranian leadership as “preemptive self-defense” countering external actors’ meddling into Iranian affairs, and as such, in the minds of Iranians, should not warrant U.S. retaliation.

As a result of the U.S. embassy seizure in 1980, the United States severed relations with Iran. The U.S. retaliatory measures included freezing U.S.-based Iranian assets and restricting travel from Iran to the United States via visa cancellations and economic sanctions. Attempts to undermine the government of Iran by the United States continued and were geared toward regime change. In order to facilitate this aim and to orchestrate a pro-Western coup, the United States communicated with opposition members in Iran, including former high-ranking military officials like General Glulam Ali Oveisi and the Shah regime’s last Prime Minister, Shahpour Bakhtiar.<sup>121</sup>

The consequences of the Carter administration’s lack of decisiveness post-1979 resulted in ever-increasing challenges for Washington-Tehran relations. Iran’s hostage-taking—as well as the United States’ failed hostage-rescue attempts, such as economic sanctions—fueled nationalist sentiments short-term in Iran, and as such, became a profitable, useful means for the Tehran government to solidify their legitimacy, whose ultimate goal was to establish a theocracy by centralizing the power of the clergy. The outcome of this tit-for-tat diplomacy increased tensions and made interfaces between the two governments practically unmanageable.<sup>122</sup>

#### **D. THE RONALD REAGAN ADMINISTRATION (JANUARY 1981 TO 1989)**

On April 7, 1980, immediately after the unsuccessful militarily hostage rescue attempt, Operation Eagle Claw, Washington severed diplomatic dealings with Tehran. The Carter administration’s diplomacy, pressure, isolation, and military efforts directed at resolving the hostage crisis ultimately failed. However, the hostages were finally released

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<sup>120</sup> Enyatollah Yazdani and Hussain Rizwan, “United States’ Policy towards Iran after the Islamic Revolution: An Iranian Perspective,” *International Studies*, (2006): 270.

<sup>121</sup> Yazdani and Rizwan, “United States’ Policy towards Iran after the Islamic Revolution,” 271.

<sup>122</sup> Dorraj and Zangeneh, “Missed Opportunities and Political Blunders,” 489.

as a consequence of the Algeria Accords, signed on the eve of the Reagan inauguration, between the United States and Iran with the mediation of the Algerian government on January 20, 1981. The conditions of the 1981 Algiers Accord, in exchange for the release of the hostages, included the Washington concession to Tehran for a policy of non-interference in Iranian internal affairs as well as the release of an approximate \$10 billion in frozen assets. This accord's legal status, however, was questioned, since although a few of the economic sanctions were lifted, the accord itself was not officially ratified in Washington. Unlike the Carter administration officials, their successors firmly disagreed with the non-interference clause.<sup>123</sup>

In addition to the United States' disapproval of the Algeria Accords, U.S. assistance to Iraq throughout the Iran-Iraq War, despite the Carter administration's neutrality policy and rhetoric toward belligerent parties, as well as the USS Vincennes incident, further fueled anti-American sentiments in Iran. The relationship between the United States and Iraq strengthened throughout the Reagan era. In 1982, during the Iran-Iraq war, while attempting to offset and derail a potential Iranian victory, the United States forged deeper ties with Iraq.<sup>124</sup> Part of this tilt toward Iraq included the removal of Iraq from the U.S. state sponsors of terrorism list, the 1982 opening of export credits, and official resumption in 1984 of diplomatic relations between Washington and Baghdad. Additionally, "Operation Staunch" was launched by the United States with the intention of dissuading other governments from supporting Iran via weapons sales during the Iraq-Iran War. Simultaneously, Washington covertly assisted with arming Iraq through other providers.<sup>125</sup>

Second, in spite of the Reagan administration's tilt toward Iraq, in the mid-1980s, the U.S. attempted to solicit the assistance of moderate-leaning Iranians with the aim of obtaining the release of American hostages by Lebanese pro-Iranian terrorist cells, and to encourage dialogue and open strategic talks with Iran. Part of the strategic opening

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<sup>123</sup> Ansari, *Confronting Iran*, 99.

<sup>124</sup> Yazdani and Rizwan, "United States' Policy towards Iran after the Islamic Revolution.

<sup>125</sup> Kenneth Katzman, *Iran: U.S. Policy and Options January 14, 2000*, CRS Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service, (2000), 3.



involved U.S. weapons sold and shipped to Iran, including anti-aircraft missiles and anti-tank weapons, in addition to the exchange of hostages. Notably, it was this last point, the exchange of hostages, which ultimately transformed and exploded into the Iran-Contra Affair.

Shortly thereafter, Iran and the United States locked horns on a number of occasions between 1987 and 1988 in the Persian Gulf over Kuwaiti oil. During Operation Earnest Will, the United States attempted to protect Kuwait's oil shipments from the frequent attacks by Iran. Simultaneously, in 1988, several ground offensives pushed Iranian forces out of Iraq, giving Iraq somewhat of an upper hand in the conflict.

Yet another interface between Iran and the United States occurred July 3, 1988, further fanning the flames of distrust and animosity between the two countries. The shooting of Iranian civilian airliner Flight 655 by the United States was viewed differently in each country. Almost 300 people died in this would-be accident. The United States affirmed it was a mistake. However, in Iran, this shoot-down, was believed to be deliberate and intentional—solidified Iranian beliefs of U.S. support toward Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war. Shortly after this incident, Iran signed U.N. Resolution 598, establishing a cease-fire between Iran and Iraq. Hostilities officially ended August 20, 1988, a little over a month and a half after the shoot-down.<sup>126</sup>

Other U.S. support for Iraq, during the course of the eight years of conflict and tensions between Iran and Iraq, included attempts to diplomatically block conventional weapons sales to Iran, affording Iraq the needed critical battlefield intelligence, and directly engaging in maritime skirmishes with Iran's naval forces, in an effort to provide protection from mines and attacks onto oil shipments transiting the Gulf. In one of these maritime engagements between Iran and the United States, Operation Praying Mantis, Iran's naval forces were sliced by more than 25 percent by the U.S. Navy.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Katzman, *Iran: U.S. Policy and Options January 14, 2000*.

<sup>127</sup> Katzman, *Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses June 11, 2010*, CRS Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service, (2010), 41.

## **E. THE GEORGE H. W. BUSH ADMINISTRATION (JANUARY 1989 TO 1993)**

The first Bush administration attempted to thaw the chilly relations between the United States and Iran, at least through its initial rhetoric. In President Bush's 1989 inaugural address, he signaled part of his foreign policy approach to Iran would be "good will begets good will."<sup>128</sup> The new Bush administration took initial steps toward expediting dialogue and contacted key players in Iranian President Rafsanjani's office. Part of the negotiations that aimed to facilitate this warming trend in foreign relations between the two countries included the initial release of the U.S. hostages in Lebanon held by pro-Iranian terrorist groups as an act of good faith designed to bolster trust. Then, Bush would take the necessary steps to start a normalizing process. Part of this normalizing trend included the release of Iranian assets that had been frozen by U.S. government since the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

Initiating his side of the diplomatic pact, President Rafsanjani started to put pressure to release the U.S. hostages on the pro-Iranian Lebanese groups holding them. Under this pressure, the hostages gained release. Secondly, at Bush's request, Rafsanjani formally denounced terrorism and softened Tehran's strong political rhetoric. On December 20, 1991, at a Friday prayer sermon, Rafsanjani expressed his disapproval of terrorism and condemned anti-Western sentiment and rhetoric.<sup>129</sup> However, Bush procrastinated with holding to his side of the bargain in the deal. Additionally, although the Islamic Republic helped secure the release of Americans held hostage in Lebanon,<sup>130</sup> and maintained a neutral status in the 1991 U.S.-led Persian Gulf war designed to drive out Saddam Hussein's Iraqi forces from Kuwait, the Bush administration failed to respond positively—if at all—to Iran's foreign policy decisions at this time as well as its

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<sup>128</sup> Quoted in Thomas R. Mattair, *Global Security Watch Iran: A Reference Handbook* (London: Praeger Security International, 2008), 65.

<sup>129</sup> Ansari, *Confronting Iran*, 131.

<sup>130</sup> Mattair, *Global Security Watch Iran*, 65.

efforts to help thaw the U.S.-Iran chill.<sup>131</sup> Moreover, the Bush administration continued to maintain its standing policy of unilateral sanctions and use of pressure to alter Iranian behavior.<sup>132</sup>

Ansari provides arguably the best synopsis for the Bush administrations' stiff foreign policy implementations toward Iran: "Despite his high standing after the Gulf War, Bush was unwilling to risk valuable political capital in an election year by appearing to be soft on Iran. Reagan had suffered badly as a consequence of his involvement with the Iran-Contra [Affair], and many questions were circulating about Bush's role not only in Iran-Contra but also in the hostage crisis, more than a decade previously."<sup>133</sup>

#### **F. THE BILL CLINTON ADMINISTRATION (JANUARY 1993 TO 2001)**

Soon after taking office in January 1993, the Clinton administration took further steps to isolate Iran as part of a two-pronged strategy directed toward Iran and Iraq known as "dual containment." According to Mattair, U.S. National Security Adviser, Anthony Lake, and the National Security Council's Director for Near East Affairs, Martin Indyk, who had worked for major pro-Israeli organizations in Washington, were the original architects of the dual containment policy.<sup>134</sup> These two high-level advisory officials did not paint a flattering picture of Iran. They maintained that Iran posed a threat to the Gulf Arab states with their conventional weapons acquisitions, that Iran was a staunch proponent of terrorism, globally, and that Iran was covertly set on a firm trajectory to develop WMDs. In order to deter the Islamic Republic from those alleged aims, one of the essential components and arguably the bedrock of the Dual Containment policy, according to these two government officials, was an increase in American military presence in the Middle East. As it geared itself in the direction of this policy, the United States took decided steps toward improving its relations with Gulf countries on the basis

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<sup>131</sup> Dorraj and Zangeneh, "Missed Opportunities and Political Blunders, 490.

<sup>132</sup> Dennis Ross, "Diplomatic Strategies for Dealing with Iran," in *Iran: Assessing U.S. Strategic Options*, 33-54 (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2008), 35.

<sup>133</sup> Ansari, *Confronting Iran*, 132.

<sup>134</sup> Mattair, *Global Security Watch Iran*, 69.

of military cooperation. Additionally, the U.S. maritime assets were mobilized. The U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet reactivated under Central Command. The Fleet operated from Bahrain. Its area of responsibility included the Gulf and Indian Oceans.<sup>135</sup>

The second significant component of Dual Containment, according to Rusillo, was to maintain the Iran-Iraq balance of power. This included preventing Iran from acquiring WMD as well as penalizing Tehran for its aggressive foreign policy implications by weakening Iran through economic and political sanctions.<sup>136</sup> The policy of Dual Containment was further formalized by several 'Executive Orders' (EO) such as EO 12957, 12959 and 13095 as well as by the 1996 Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA). ILSA served a very strategic purpose in the Iraq-Iran political dynamic in the Middle East. The Act itself—designed to act as a preventive measure hindering the potential re-emergence of Iran's oil industry after its devastation during the eight-year war with Iraq throughout the 1980s—ensured that countries did not invest more than \$20 million into Iran's energy sector.<sup>137</sup>

The discovery of significant Caspian Sea region oil reserves during Clinton's second term, however, shifted the realities associated with U.S.-Iranian relations. Due to Iran's geopolitical importance in its neighborhood and proximity to Central Asia and the Caspian Sea, several Clinton officials called for a new course of action, since it appeared to them that Iran's revolutionary ideas had stymied and reached an impasse. The new policy toward Iran, developed during Clinton's second term, and known as "differentiated containment," established a road map geared toward normalizing relations with Iran. This policy made a distinction between U.S. foreign policy agendas and goals

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<sup>135</sup> Mattair, *Global Security Watch Iran*, 69.

<sup>136</sup> Victor L. Russillo, *Reassessing US Policy toward Iran*, USAWC strategy research project (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2003), 3.

<sup>137</sup> Dorraj and Zangeneh, "Missed Opportunities and Political Blunders, 490.

in Iraq and Iran. The U.S. strategy in Iraq would maintain status quo and its policy of containment. However, with Iran, the U.S. agenda would formally take steps toward diplomatic and political normalization.<sup>138</sup>

As the Clinton administration re-positioned itself politically vis-à-vis Iran, the 1997 presidential election of Iranian reformist cleric Muhammad Khatami was fortuitous and provided a necessary conduit for rapprochement. Khatami desired more positive relations with the United States. His rhetoric included encouraging a “dialogue of civilizations” and the breakdown of the current U.S.-Iranian “wall of mistrust.” Both nations set a trajectory geared toward establishing the necessary groundwork for gaining each other’s confidence and chipping away at the former icy relations between them.<sup>139</sup>

The Clinton administration took several high-visibility, very public steps to forge a path toward friendship and greater partnership with Iran. Iran was removed as a narco-trafficking state. The U.S. also stopped using the label “rogue state,” which had been used frequently during the first Bush administration as well as Clinton’s first term, with respect to Iran. Iran’s leftist opposition group—*Mujahedi e Khalgh (MEK)*—was put on the U.S. State Department’s list of official terrorist organizations. Previous restrictions imposed on the sale of medical and agricultural goods were eased and sanctions were lifted on foreign companies such as Total, the French oil company that had continued to do business with Iran in spite of U.S. pressure.<sup>140</sup>

In yet another signal of good U.S. intentions, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, in a March 17, 2000 speech, formally acknowledged the U.S.’s role in the overthrow of Iran’s government in 1953 and continued support for the Shah and the oppressive domestic policies he ruled by. She also formally conceded, on behalf of the United States, the support Washington proffered to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Former Carter administration National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, former Reagan administration Assistant Secretary of State, Richard Murphy, and former Bush administration National Security Adviser, Brent Scowcroft, published an article entitled “Differentiated Containment” in *Foreign Affairs* on June 1997.

<sup>139</sup> Dorraj and Zangeneh, “Missed Opportunities and Political Blunders,” 491.

<sup>140</sup> Mattair, *Global Security Watch Iran*, 73.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

On the Iranian side, President Khatami publicly criticized and condemned terrorism as inhumane and crystallized in his rhetoric that Iran would not interfere in the conflict between Israel and Palestine if a diplomatic, peaceful solution could be achieved. Khatami officially announced his regret, on behalf of Iran, for the 1979–81 hostage crisis. When addressing the ever-present question of Iran and the nuclear question, he again publicly declared that Iran's ambitions did not include transformation into a regional or global nuclear power, nor was it seen as a future of the nation's long-term objectives.

Despite all of the rhetoric between Washington and Tehran, however, the reality and outcome of all these strategic shifts, designed as attempts to normalize relations between the two countries, the results were quite different than the political posturing intended. The process of rapprochement between the two countries eventually failed. On one hand, some scholars argued that the reasons behind this failure were primarily the Khatami administration's rejection of mutual dialogue and its more-or-less unchanged, frosty position toward the United States. Adherents to this conceptual framework claimed that "there was no real difference between hardliners and pragmatists in Iran."<sup>142</sup> On the other hand, some other analysts argue that it was primarily the U.S. Congress that constrained Bush administration officials to negotiate with Tehran, as well as the general unsupportive consensus in Congress regarding the reconciliation policy toward Iran that were the main obstacles preventing the formal, diplomatic opening of the Iranian question.<sup>143</sup>

Normalization of the U.S.-Iran relationship failed to achieve success by the end of Clinton's presidency and his two terms in office. Washington and Tehran were unable to move beyond an initial rapprochement. This study concludes that a breakthrough in the normalization process was thwarted by an amalgamation of extreme factional rivalries between the opposing Iranian political parties, in addition to the lack of a compelling offer presented by the Clinton administration.

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<sup>142</sup> Mattair, *Global Security Watch Iran*, 73.

<sup>143</sup> Dorraj and Zangeneh, "Missed Opportunities and Political Blunders," 491.

## **G. THE GEORGE W. BUSH ADMINISTRATION (JANUARY 2001 TO 2008)**

Cooperation between the Washington and Tehran accelerated after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States. The people of Iran held candlelight vigils expressing their grief and solidarity toward the American families, and the Iranian government condemned the tragic 9/11 terrorist attacks.<sup>144</sup> Furthermore, after the “War on Terror,” some of the most salient people-to-people talks that occurred between the United States and Iran that were held in Paris, Geneva, and Bonn at monthly intervals, focused on synchronizing both countries’ cooperation regarding the Afghanistan issue. When the United States invaded Afghanistan post-9/11, the Khatami administration provided crucial assistance to the United States in the process of defeating the Taliban, routing al-Qaeda and establishing a new interim government in Afghanistan. Additionally, Tehran opened Iran’s airspace to U.S. aircraft, collaborated with the CIA and provided crucial intelligence about the Taliban. Iran also played a critical role assisting with the overthrow of the Taliban and the formation of the U.S.-backed national government in Afghanistan.<sup>145</sup>

Although further cooperation with Iran was considered by the State Department and CIA, opposition by the Defense Department and the White House, as well as Israel, led by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, interfered with the process. These latter parties held strong fears and reservations that further dialogue and collaboration with Iran would backfire and instead leave a strong Iran in its place without consideration to nor the necessary attention paid to the challenges which continued to persist between Israel and Iran. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and Vice President Cheney’s concurrence on this issue led the Bush administration to cease talks in Geneva after the al-Qaeda attacks that killed eight Americans and twenty-six Saudis in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, May 12, 2003.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Jim Muir, *BBC News*. September 17, 2001. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/1549573.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/1549573.stm) (accessed March 1, 2009)

<sup>145</sup> Muhammad Sahimi, *Role of US Militarism in Ahmadinejad’s Rise*. August 14, 2009. <http://original.antiwar.com/sahimi/2009/08/14/role-of-us-militarism-in-ahmadinejads-rise/print> (accessed March 4, 2009).

<sup>146</sup> Mattair, *Global Security Watch Iran*, 75–78.

In 2002, mutual hostilities suddenly erupted when George W. Bush positioned Iran, along with Iraq and North Korea, in what he termed the “axis of evil.” The Bush administration criticized Iran for a series of transgressions, in particular, proliferation of nuclear energy, the pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and support for terrorism. The accusations backfired, and Tehran officials responded to these accusations by referring the United States by the moniker “global arrogance.”<sup>147</sup> Moreover, many Iranians interpreted it as a deep insult to their national pride, which, as a result impaired the credibility of the Iranian reformists who were advocating reconciliation with the United States.<sup>148</sup>

In late 2003, a prospective opportunity favoring potential rapprochement between the United States and Iran came to fruition when the Khatami administration presented a comprehensive proposal, known as the “grand bargain,” to the United States. According to this proposal, if the United States promised to remove Iran from the “axis of evil,” to give a guarantee of security (not to attack Iran), to lift economic sanctions and to allow Europe to invest in Iran, then Iran would guarantee to allow full nuclear inspections, help transform Hezbollah and Hamas into legitimate political formations, and recognize Israel, providing that Israel withdrew from Gaza and the West Bank. The offer was delivered to Washington, D.C., by the Swiss ambassador representing American interests in Iran. However, the Bush administration chose escalation over peaceful resolution and rejected Tehran’s offer. Bush’s unfavorable response to Tehran’s offer came with significant consequences. The Khatami reformist movement, despite its efforts toward rapprochement with the United States, suffered politically and achieved nothing despite their accommodating and more-than-conciliatory overtures and policies toward Washington. Resultantly, and most likely unintentionally, the response to Tehran selected by the Bush administration strengthened the Iranian hardliner conservatives.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, 3.

<sup>148</sup> Amuzegar, “Iran’s Crumbling Revolution,” 46.

<sup>149</sup> Dorraj and Zangeneh, “Missed Opportunities and Political Blunders,” 493.



Some scholars argued that the Bush administration's foreign policy implementations toward Iran did not merely undermine the reform-oriented Khatami presidency, but also contributed to the breakdown of the reform movement, which gradually became a pervasive trend throughout the Islamic Republic.<sup>150</sup> A perplexing declaration made by the White House on July 12, 2002, which coincided with the third anniversary of the pro-democracy students' uprisings at Tehran University, stated to "all Iranians who sought freedom and human rights that they had no better friend than the United States." This suggestion, however, was perceived as meddling in Iranian internal affairs and caused a backlash. The unelected ruler of Iran, Ali Khomeini, whom Bush sought to condemn, used the message to arouse public anger against the United States. As a result, government-sponsored demonstrations in Tehran and other major cities became a forum for a brand of virulent anti-Americanism rarely witnessed during Khatami's presidency. Meanwhile, rumors circulated in Tehran that in response to U.S. pressures, conservative hardliners were planning to declare a state of emergency, dissolve the *Majles* and dismiss the Khatami government. The conservative-led judiciary closed newspapers, harassed and jailed dissidents, forbid the teaching of Western music, insisted that shops and restaurants close at midnight, and generally suppressed domestic opposition—all in the name of social order.<sup>151</sup>

The reformists were purged from Iran's *Majles* in the aftermath of the 2004 elections. Then, on the eve of Iran's 2005 presidential election, George W. Bush, in denouncing Tehran's theocracy, said, "Iran is ruled by men who suppress liberty at home and spread terror across the world. Power is in the hands of an unelected few who have retained power through an electoral process that ignores the basic requirements of democracy. The June 17th presidential elections are sadly consistent with this oppressive record." Addressing the Iranian people, Bush added, "As you stand for your own liberty, the people of America stand with you."<sup>152</sup> From an Iranian perspective, this statement

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<sup>150</sup> Talwar, "Iran in the Balance." And Amuzegar, "Iran's Crumbling Revolution."

<sup>151</sup> Amuzegar, "Iran's Crumbling Revolution," 47.

<sup>152</sup> Robin Wright and Michael A. Fletcher, *The Washington Post*, June 17, 2005.  
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/06/16/AR2005061601056.html> (accessed March 1, 2009).

was interpreted as a humiliation of Tehran governance and a meddling of Iranian domestic affairs. Hence, it again caused a backlash. Many analysts and politicians believe that Washington's approaches toward Iranian affairs had, perhaps, inadvertently assisted the hardliners with gaining popular support throughout the 2005 election, which lifted Ahmadinejad to the presidential office.

Coincidentally, along with the rise of the Washington neoconservatives during Bush's second presidential term was the rise of second-generation Iranian revolutionary hardliners to power with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as newly elected president of the Islamic Republic. A nuclear Iran became the central concern during Bush's second term as president.<sup>153</sup> The priority of Bush's U.S. foreign policy strategy for Iran centered on ensuring and preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear capability, and thus become an even greater security threat to the United States and her allies. It became a pervasive concern that a nuclear Iran would assert its power on the international stage and undermine U.S. strategy and goals in the Middle East even further. The George W. Bush administration made concerted efforts to restrict Iranian strategic capacity via political diplomacy and extensive international and allied-backed economic sanctions.

The George W. Bush administration also tabled for consideration more aggressive ways of dealing with Iran. The use of non-diplomatic means, including military force and compulsory U.S.-led Iranian regime change, became associated with Vice President Cheney and his security advisory staff.<sup>154</sup>

Iran also, took several steps towards rapprochement and normalization between Washington and Tehran. President Ahmadinejad wrote two letters in 2006 indicating he sought to ease tensions between his country and the United States, one to President George W. Bush and one to the American people. These letters were written in spite of the nuclear stand-off between the nations and Ahmedinajad's anti-American and anti-Israeli rhetoric. Additionally, after more than 27 years of frozen diplomacy on the issue

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<sup>153</sup> Dorraj and Zangeneh, "Missed Opportunities and Political Blunders," 493.

<sup>154</sup> Katzman, *Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses June 11, 2010*, 42.

of Iraqi security, Tehran began negotiations with Washington on this issue. In just two years, more than four sets of negotiations concerning Iraqi security occurred between two governments.<sup>155</sup>

Despite Iran's diplomatic concessions, U.S. officials stalled and were less obliging in return. Ahmedinejad's letters were snubbed and rejected. In fact, U.S. congressional officials still feared the threat of Iran. Congress passed funding requested by the Bush administration to initiate covert operations intended to weaken the Iranian regime with the ultimate goal of bringing about regime change. Additionally, Washington passed Resolution 21 in June 2007, urging the United Nations Security Council to charge Iranian President Ahmadinejad with violation of the 1948 Genocide Convention and the UN Charter by publicly calling for Israel to be "wiped off the map."<sup>156</sup> Moreover, the United States ratcheted up its military threats towards Iran. The Bush administration dispatched two carrier battle groups to the Persian Gulf in May 2007 as a form of political and military posturing intended to send a message to Iran. U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney announced a new direction of the U.S.' Iranian policy on the deck of the U.S.S. John C. Stennis in the Persian Gulf: "We will stand with our friends in opposing extremism and strategic threats. We will continue bringing relief to those who suffer and delivering justice to the enemies of freedom. And we'll stand with others to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons and dominating this region."<sup>157</sup>

In the end, these threats served to provide increasing support to Ahmadinejad and his hard-line government and conservative followers. Independent, reformist, and democratic movements, as well as oppositional movements were considered agents and servant policies of the United State and other external powers. Furthermore, reformist

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<sup>155</sup> Dorraj and Zangeneh, "Missed Opportunities and Political Blunders," 493.

<sup>156</sup> Steve Rothman, *San Diego Jewish World*. June 20, 2007. <http://www.jewishlightseeing.com/2007-sdjw/2007-06-SDJW/2007-06-20/2007-06-20.htm> (accessed February 20, 2009).

<sup>157</sup> Vali Nasr and Ray Takeyh. *Foreign Affairs*. January 2008. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/63048/vali-nasr-and-ray-takeyh/the-costs-of-containing-iran> (accessed February 10, 2009).

movements were restricted and suppressed by hardliners. The constant pressure on the reformists and their oppression by the hardliners prevented them from organizing and confronting Ahmadinejad and his supporters more effectively.<sup>158</sup>

## **H. THE BARACK OBAMA ADMINISTRATION (JANUARY 2009– )**

By emphasizing the failure of his predecessor's inability to deal with the challenges that the Islamic Republic of Iran presented the United States with, President Obama cautioned in the 2010 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) that "Iran's behavior became more threatening."<sup>159</sup> According to the 2010 NSS, the top priority of the Obama administration's national security policy is reversing the spread of nuclear weapons and forming a greater and more secure Middle East that serves U.S. national interests.<sup>160</sup> Tehran and its policies directly contradict both objectives the Obama administration seeks. Therefore, the Obama administration's main efforts and desired end-state with Iran included a re-orientation of Iranian policy away from nuclear weapons, Tehran's menacing threats to its geographic neighbors and its general support and promotion of terrorist activities.

Idealistic and hopeful that Tehran would indeed transform under U.S. pressure and political coaxing, the Obama administration set a path toward attempting to talk Iran out of pursuing its quest for a nuclear capability and to essentially quit its nuclear program. As yet another form of the proverbial olive branch, Washington decided that yet another piece to its Iranian strategy would be to accept the current Iranian government and concurrently to help facilitate Iran's emergence and expansion into the global economy. On the Persian New Year, March 21, 2009, President Obama's message to Iran was clear: a policy of direct diplomacy would be pursued. Simultaneously, Washington's

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<sup>158</sup> Muhammad Sahimi, *Role of US Militarism in Ahmadinejad's Rise*. August 14, 2009. <http://original.antiwar.com/sahimi/2009/08/14/role-of-us-militarism-in-ahmadinejads-rise/print> (accessed March 4, 2009).

<sup>159</sup> The United States, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: White House, 2010), 26.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

rhetoric under the Obama administration did not appear to condone options such as regime change or military action. However, all options were still left on the table should they need to be considered.<sup>161</sup>

Despite the well-intended direct diplomacy policy, both State and Defense department officials, Hillary D. R. Clinton and Robert M. Gates, maintained and publicly expressed their doubts that Iran's policies would be affected at all by Washington's engagement with Tehran. Others in on Obama's staff, including Dennis Ross, Clinton's advisor for Southwest Asia (which was focused on Iran) and who was later assigned to the White House, believed a clearer carrot-and-stick approach needed to be applied. Washington policy toward Iran, in their estimation, required more clarity. Clear incentives and crystal-clear penalties needed to be applied should Iran pursue its intended nuclear path.<sup>162</sup>

## **I. CONCLUSIONS OF CHAPTER IV**

This chapter tried to shed a light on formidable challenges faced over the last three decades between Iran and the United States. Some view the political chilliness, unfulfilled rhetoric and diplomatic stand-off as a power struggle between a formerly muscular, robust empire and a civilization that has endured the tests of time versus a young, incumbent political-military-economic giant with global, hegemonic ambitions. The points of conflict and cooperation that characterize the Washington-Tehran saga is driven by both differing ideological frameworks as well as many differences and points of convergence when considering national interests.<sup>163</sup>

From some United States Congressional officials' perspectives, even engaging in talks with Iran is considered "appeasement."<sup>164</sup> Yet, the United States fails to see the political hypocrisy in taking this view, since the United States demands that Iran appease Washington's demands related to its nuclear program and completely abandon it before

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<sup>161</sup> Katzman, *Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses June 11, 2010*, 44.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Dorraj and Zangeneh, "Missed Opportunities and Political Blunders," 497.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

the U.S. will itself come to the negotiation table. The current containment policy has clearly been unsuccessful to the point of failure. The policy is archaic, a Cold War mentality remnant consistently applied by Washington toward Iran, since 1979, by both ends of the political spectrum. Kinzer, in his book *Reset*, further attacks Washington's Iranian strategy. Washington's offers, he says, do not provide the Iranian people with what they seek: "respect, dignity, a restoration of lost pride."<sup>165</sup> In fact, the policies only fan the flames of antagonism, since Tehran interprets them as a removal of these three elements, viewing the policies as disrespectful, dishonorable and undermining their dignity as an equal partner. Essentially, the policies retain a large counterproductive element. This carrot-and-stick approach "may be appropriate for donkeys," Kinzer writes, but "not for dealing with a nation ten times older than [the United States]."<sup>166</sup> Transforming Iran from an enemy to a friend takes patience, delicate diplomacy and reassurance. Threats will only bring out the "fight" mentality in Iran. Iran will not break under U.S. pressure. Diplomacy and a strategy of reassurance may be the keys to addressing the challenges Iran poses to the United States and its allies.

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<sup>165</sup> Stephen Kinzer, *Reset: Iran, Turkey, and America's Future* (New York: Times Books, 2010), 214.

<sup>166</sup> Kinzer, *Reset*, 216.

## **V. POLICY OPTIONS ADDRESSING IRANIAN CHALLENGES TO THE U.S. AND HER ALLIES**

For years, the leaders of the Islamic Republic have been attempting to undermine U.S. interests in the region in order to achieve their national objective to emerge as the hegemonic power in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Iran, therefore, became an obstacle for the United States' long-term strategy in these regions. There seemed to be no easy solution to the question of how the United States should deal with Iran given their conflicting national interests. For more than thirty years, Washington has attempted several solutions under the purview of a number of different presidents and different U.S. political party agendas. However, a viable solution still eludes Washington policy-makers more than a decade into the twenty-first century. Solutions tried and failed by successive U.S. administrations included undeclared warfare, unilateral concessions and almost everything in between. Some of these policies, in fact, made some headway into dealing with the roadblocks posed by Tehran—although critics will most likely not admit this—however, Tehran's support for terrorist associations, its quest for a nuclear capability and its broader attempts to upset the region's status quo remain largely unchanged.<sup>167</sup>

The failure of U.S. strategies for more than three decades, as well as the scope and gravity of challenges that Iran has posed, have motivated a myriad of pundits and policy makers to address the Iranian question from various angles and perspectives. They have increasingly released many scholarly pieces, strategic-level researches, analytical reviews and assessment papers, especially after the 2003 discovery of the Iranian secret nuclear facility, which have proposed different methodologies to deal with Tehran's confrontational ideology. In this chapter, we will analyze four different U.S. policy options for dealing with Tehran, which are prevalently argued in scholarly literature regarding Iran as well as in the U.S. political environment: the Military Option, Containment, Regime Change, and Engagement Option.

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<sup>167</sup> Kenneth M. Pollack, Daniel L. Byman, Martin Indyk, Suzanne Maloney, Michael E. O'Hanlon and Bruce Riedel, *Which Path to Persia? Options for a New American Strategy toward Iran* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2009).

On one hand, some scholars and politicians have seen Iran as a rival and assume that the only way to solve the Iranian question is to defeat Iran by using whatever means necessary, including military strikes.<sup>168</sup> An example of the military option for dealing with Iran can be assessed in Michael A. Ledeen's book, *Accomplice to Evil*, which presents that "Acknowledging the existence and actions of evil enemies means accepting that we [the U.S.] are at war, and then designing and conducting a strategy to win."<sup>169</sup>

On the other hand, some scholars and politicians suggest that the best strategy for dealing with Iran is to maintain the Containment strategy—to maintain or strengthen current economic sanctions and the political isolation of Iran—instead of the use of military intervention.<sup>170</sup> For example, Senator Joseph R. Biden, in his speech to the U.S. Congress on March 29, 2007, suggests, "we must continue to intensify pressure on Iran over its nuclear program with coordinated international sanctions that isolate Tehran..."<sup>171</sup> In the same vein of thought, by indicating devastating unintentional consequences of contingent military strikes, as well as emphasizing the current economic problems of Iran that make Tehran more vulnerable to economic sanctions, Kenneth Pollack, in his article "Iran: Three Alternative Futures," as a pragmatic solution, suggests that "the best policy for the West to pursue toward Iran would be imposing harsh sanctions on Iran to provoke a major internal brouhaha that could (and arguably would likely) produce a clear-cut victory for the pragmatists over the hardliners."<sup>172</sup> Similarly, Douglass and Hays, in their work entitled *U.S. Strategy for Iran*, proposes that "the U.S. should accelerate current efforts to weaken the Iranian economy and should continue coercive pressure on Iran's leadership through gradually stronger sanctions focused on Iran's economy, nuclear program, leadership and weapons proliferation."<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Ledeen, *Accomplice to Evil*: .

<sup>169</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>170</sup> Pollack, "Iran: Three Alternative Futures." Douglass and Hays, *A US Strategy for Iran*.

<sup>171</sup> United States, *Iran : An Update : Hearing Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, One Hundred Tenth Congress, first session, March 29, 2007*. (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008), 4.

<sup>172</sup> Pollack, "Iran: Three Alternative Futures."

<sup>173</sup> Douglass and Hays, *A US Strategy for Iran*, 77, 81.



Yet another policy recommendation for solving the Iranian problem comes from reformist-minded politicians and scholars who believe in the importance of bilateral and multilateral political negotiations with Iran instead of economic sanctions and political isolations. In the last few years, U.S. congressional talks regarding the Iranian issue have focused on the necessity of a diplomatic relationship with Iran such as the talks dated October 30, 2007—*Iran: Reality, Options, and Consequences*—and the talks dated April 24, 2008—*Addressing Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*. In former congressional speeches, Christopher Shays suggested that “the [U.S.] administration must understand that even though Iran is a rogue state, it is still a country with enormous influence in the Middle East, which we have to deal with one way or the other. It is time for us to start talking with Iran diplomat to diplomat, politician to politician and person to person.”<sup>174</sup>In later congressional talks, Senator Dianne Feinstein indicated that “I believe that an Iranian policy based on a military solution makes little sense. Only by talking and bringing to bear the best efforts of diplomacy can real progress be made. The next Administration must evaluate anew our Nation’s approach to this Middle Eastern arena and evolve a new approach—one based on robust diplomacy, rather than constant threat of war.”<sup>175</sup>

In addition to political and economic isolation, many scholars are well aware of the necessity of a new U.S. strategy pursuing diplomatic engagement with Iran.<sup>176</sup> Peter D. Schmid recommends “...lifting all economic sanctions, replacing U.S.-led political isolation of Iran with ‘passive promotion’ of reform, and some military disengagement in the region.”<sup>177</sup> Similarly, Puneet Talvar, in his article *Iran in the Balance*, indicates that it

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<sup>174</sup> United States, *Iran: Reality, Options, and Consequences Part I-Iranian People and Attitudes, Hearing Before the Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform House of Representatives, One Hundred Tenth Congress, First Session, October 30, 2007* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2009), 7.

<sup>175</sup> United States, *Addressing Iran's Nuclear Ambitions, Hearing Before the Federal Financial Management, Government Information, Federal Services, and International Security Subcommittee of the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs United States Senate, One Hundred Tenth Congress, Second Session, April 24, 2008* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008), 7.

<sup>176</sup> Amuzegar, “Iran's Crumbling Revolution,” 44-57. Sahimi, *Role of US Militarism in Ahmadinejad's Rise*.

<sup>177</sup> Peter D. Schmid, “Expect the Unexpected: A Religious Democracy in Iran.” *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* ix, no.2 (Winter-Spring 2003): 190.

is time to abandon the containment strategy inherited from the previous U.S. administration and embark upon a new policy of moderate engagement for the U.S. administration.<sup>178</sup>

## A. CONTAINMENT

America's preferred policy, when dealing with a nation deemed too aggressive for the engagement option or diplomatic dialogue, is considered too powerful for military invasion or attack, and/or is too tyrannical or oppressive to be overthrown or for regime change to be induced by external actors, is traditionally the policy of containment. The Islamic Republic of Iran typifies, and is practically the poster-child for the would-be practical application of the containment policy, as defined by Washington's policy-makers. As such, the policy of containment has been the preferred option when dealing with Tehran for over 30 years. This preferred policy has been adopted largely by default, since other strategy options applied, including negotiations, regime change and limited conflicts, have achieved limited-to-no success in mobilizing a Tehran more amenable to Washington's aims.<sup>179</sup>

The United States' containment policy's central feature, since the Islamic Revolution, revolves largely around unilateral sanctions. Washington employed these unilateral sanctions with regime change as its ultimate end state in addition to the hoped-for ancillary goals of discouraging weapons sales, commercial trading and foreign investment by other countries in Iran. The litany of sanctions imposed on Iran over the course of 30 years did limit Iran to some extent in various ways.<sup>180</sup> They aided in hindering Iran's capacity for military development and growth and limited Iran in part, economically, from advancing and progressing as quickly as it otherwise may have potentially been able. The sanctions, arguably, also hampered Iran's ability to form partnerships with a number of key nations who could have proved instrumental toward helping Iran achieve its goals. Additionally, the sanctions appeared to also obstruct, to a

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<sup>178</sup> Talwar, "Iran in the Balance," 69.

<sup>179</sup> Pollack et al. *Which Path to Persia?*, 179.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 180.

limited extent, Iran's capacity to diplomatically wield the power that Iran's vast natural gas and oil reserves could have otherwise garnered. In spite of the limited successes, ultimately, the sanctions, and as such, the containment policy toward Iran, failed to achieve its intended purposes. The Islamic Republic maintained its efforts to undermine the regional peace efforts. Tehran has not been politically, economically or internationally isolated. Finally, Iran's nuclear ambitions have not been deterred.<sup>181</sup>

Perhaps more importantly than its partial successes, some scholars argue that intense containment policy practices toward the Islamic Republic, particularly unilateral U.S. economic sanctions, in effect harmed U.S. national interests rather than transforming Iran into a responsible, representative state. Richard N. Haass, in his article, *Sanction Madness*, emphasizes the need to reassess the use and application of U.S. unilateral sanctions. According to him, the major reasons for the necessary reevaluation of U.S. economic sanction policy compromise not only financial and physiological costs, high frequency and low efficiency of the economic sanctions, but also their overall modest contribution to United States' foreign policy goals. Haass adds that increasing the use of sanctions is "deplorable," because of their anemic overall contribution to U.S. strategy while simultaneously being costly and even counter-productive. In 1995 alone, sanctions cost the United States between \$15 and \$19 billion and affected more than 200,000 workers. This cost does not even include the costs of secondary sanctions, leveled against those third-party states who do not agree with particular sanctions against targeted countries.<sup>182</sup>

Unilateral sanctions are even less likely to achieve results because a country under sanctions can find alternate suppliers. It is difficult to obtain international support for sanctions in general because most governments tend to value economic interactions and trade more than the U.S. does and are less willing to forfeit the associated profits. For instance, the United States is the only permanent member of the United Nations Security

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<sup>181</sup> Suzanne Maloney and Ray Takeyh, "Pathway to Coexistence: A New U.S. Policy toward Iran," in *Restoring the Balance: A Middle East Strategy for the Next President*, 59–92 (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 63.

<sup>182</sup> Richard N. Haass, "Sanction Madness," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no.5 (November-December 1997): 74–85.

Council to impose comprehensive actions against Iran. Russia and China are principally opposing sanctions against Iran. Although the United Kingdom and France principally support the United State's efforts against Iran, their governments and some of their companies still continue to trade with the Iranian government.<sup>183</sup>

According to Maloney and Taheyh, "Containment is actually obsolete because Iran is no longer an expansionist power."<sup>184</sup> Tehran's revolutionary ideology shifted toward a more pragmatic mandate, most notably after the Iran-Iraq war. The war and its devastating outcome left Iran's economy in a shambles and Iran's leadership had to come to terms with its new limitations, shifting global balance of power and its impractical ambitions.

In the future, the containment strategy is less likely to achieve its objectives. Iran has emerged today as an increasingly potent, disruptive actor among the Middle Eastern sphere of influence, more so than it had been in the nascent days of the revolution, when its power to adversely impact international relations should have been at its zenith. The United States—unintentionally—played a key role in advancing the strength of Iran's debilitating, disruptive power. The power vacuum that remained post-U.S. invasion of Iraq and operations in Afghanistan allowed Tehran to reassert itself as the regional power broker, whereas previously, Iranian power and influence had been relatively negligible.<sup>185</sup>

## **B. THE MILITARY OPTION**

Some politicians/analysts maintain their staunch position as naysayers and believe Tehran will never cooperate diplomatically, or otherwise, with the United States or its allies. These people assert that the only policies, that will "speak" to Iran and mobilize its government to a response would be United States unilateral military action. Over the course of thirty years, they highlight that Washington's various economic and diplomatic

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<sup>183</sup> Michael Jacobson, "Sanctions against Iran: A Promising Struggle," *The Washington Quarterly* 31, no.3 (Summer 2008): 69–88.

<sup>184</sup> Maloney and Takeyh, "Pathway to Coexistence," 64.

<sup>185</sup> Pollack et al. *Which Path to Persia?* 180.

strategies and schemes have failed to elicit the desired responses from Tehran. Adherents to this ideological framework presume that since all other methods have been tried and failed in pressuring Iran to do the United States' bidding, that the unilateral use of force remains the only—and best—solution. As such, the military option remains the only sensible, realistic policy tool, which might change Tehran's relations with the United States. These scholars argue that the military option provides policy-makers the greatest benefits rapidly and quickly. The United States would be able to operate with limited, if any, allied support and could easily take control of the helm in the operations. Policy advocates of the military option claim that this option is more effective than the containment policy. Should Iran cross the nuclear threshold, the ability to keep Tehran bridled and reigned-in will become difficult to impossible.<sup>186</sup>

Strategists, when addressing the military option, consider two different military ideas. The first option includes, essentially, a ground invasion and forced regime change, similar to Saddam in Iraq and Afghanistan's Taliban. Once this regime change occurred, Washington would provide support to a new government in Iran, which would bend to its policy aims including eliminating the nuclear weapons program. The new regime, with U.S. backing, would neither support terrorist/insurgent organizations nor other anti-U.S. revolutionary entities, and would proceed to eliminate these insidious elements among the population. Regional and international terrorist groups, such as Hezbollah, the Palestinian Jihad and Hamas, would lose a key partner and supporter of their ambitions. And Washington's desired end-state would be achieved: the elimination of a regime that consistently countered U.S., interests in the region and in the international community.

A significant consideration of the military option as an actual policy choice, however, would be the magnificent cost involved of its actual implementation. Iran itself would be a challenge to invade and successfully occupy in a number of ways than Iraq. In addition to more than triple the population and landmass than Iraq, Iran is more like Afghanistan topographically. Iran boasts more mountainous terrain features than Iraq, including the Zagros Mountains, extending from southwest Turkey through Iran and into

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<sup>186</sup> Pollack et al. *Which Path to Persia?* 84.

Afghanistan as well as other geographic features, making a ground invasion increasingly challenging. Additionally, Iran has not been locked down by stringent international economic sanctions, unlike Iraq, and has thus had the freedom to mobilize and amass a greater military capacity. Since Iran has a more robust military, the potential loss of life in armed conflict with Iran would resultantly be higher as well and, therefore, costly both militarily and politically.<sup>187</sup>

The second choice considered by scholars when addressing the military option considers a limited American airstrike campaign aimed at specific objectives. Target sets would include Iranian nuclear facilities and major weapons delivery systems. They argue that the limited, target-specific airstrike operation keyed in on the destruction of an Iranian nuclear weapons capability would, in the end, at the very minimum, delay by ten years or more Iran's ability to produce and acquire home-grown nuclear weapons.<sup>188</sup>

But while this second option might buy time, it would be ineffective, long-term, at halting Iran's nuclear ambitions. Another salient concern is that implementing this option could result in unintended consequences, and instead, further solidify Iranian beliefs that the nuclear capacity was, in fact, a vital necessity as a preventive measure against future armed attacks. U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates emphasized this point in a 2009 speech: "there is no military option that does anything more than buy time."<sup>189</sup>

Iran responded to lessons learned by other countries regarding nuclear facility strategic placement. For example, Iranian nuclear installations were intentionally hardened and dispersed and strategically located near Tehran or other large population centers in response to Iran's observation of the 1981 attack on Iraq's nuclear reactor by Israel. Significant hurdles in information and intelligence gathering, in Iran provide U.S. military and civilian leadership with little faith that a limited airstrike campaign would conclusively provide the desired incapacitation of Iran's nuclear program. The probable

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<sup>187</sup> Stephen Zunes, "The U.S. and Iran: Democracy, Terrorism, and Nuclear Weapons," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, July 26, 2005.

<sup>188</sup> Pollack et al. *Which Path to Persia?* 103.

<sup>189</sup> Quoted in Stephen Kinzer, *Reset: Iran, Turkey, and America's Future* (New York: Times Books, 2010), 210.

“catch 22” hands U.S. leaders yet another dilemma to consider in the decision-making process. A successful military campaign against Iran would incapacitate them; however, it would not stop them and would, in turn, enrage Iran such that the airstrike would informally act as a catalyst, providing further impetus to their nuclear ambitions and justifications for their ignorance of the international community’s laws and public opinions.<sup>190</sup>

In the long run, use of the military option vis-à-vis Iran would not be viable and, in fact, would significantly damage U.S. national security objectives in the Middle East. Use of force against Tehran would likely backfire and instead be an impractical solution for the Iranian question and the challenges she poses to the U.S. and her allies.<sup>191</sup>

The use of a military intervention against the Islamic Republic would translate into several adverse reactions by Tehran. In addition to fuelling nationalistic fever and strengthening public support for the hardliners, and for a government with nuclear ambitions, use of force could also run the risk of Tehran retaliating with armed conventional, as well as unconventional, attacks most likely targeted toward key U.S. allies, namely Israel. Additionally, the military option would solidify a death sentence for the fragile Arab-Israeli peace process and could adversely impact the stabilization process in Iraq. Use of this option in Iran by the United States would also generate increased regional chaos. Turmoil in Iran could then be channeled to areas of U.S. national interests such as Turkey, Afghanistan and even Pakistan.<sup>192</sup>

A U.S.-led attack against Iran would most likely increase, particularly over the short term, rather than decrease Tehran’s aim to develop, acquire and maintain a nuclear

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<sup>190</sup> Maloney and Takeyh, “Pathway to Coexistence,” 62.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Pollack et al., *Which Path to Persia?*, 89.

weapons capability.<sup>193</sup> Moreover, the real winners emerging from the use of this option would most likely be Iran's hardliners and radical Islamic anti-American groups in the region.<sup>194</sup>

### **C. REGIME CHANGE**

Some politicians and scholars believe that neither the diplomatic nor the military options proposed above provide an effective means to deal with the Iranian question. They believe that use of the military option strengthens hardliners by increasing public support for them. The diplomatic approach would also never ultimately achieve its goal due to the regime's excessive anti-American attitude as well as its fundamentally incompatible structure with Washington.<sup>195</sup> Therefore, these scholars advocate that the only way to protect American vital interests in the region is via regime change—toppling hardliners and installing a pro-American government.

There are three methods that are suggested to enable regime change or, at a minimum, help undermine the incumbent regime. The first method would be supporting a popular revolution. The main goal of this option would be to create a popular uprising by supporting anti-regime groups and motivating people who dislike the clerical regime in the Iranian society, particularly among the reformists, intellectuals, students and laborers. The second method suggested includes stirring up Iran's ethnic groups. The major objective of this alternative is to create a suitable environment for revolution (upheaval and chaos) by supporting ethnic opposition groups, such as Kurds, Baluch, Arab, Azeri and so on, and their insurgent activities. The third method scholars suggest is the most direct of the three—promoting a coup. This option's main aim would be to engineer a military coup against Tehran by supporting the regime opposition groups in the Iranian military.

In practice, certain former U.S. administrations used one or more of the alternatives mentioned above in their attempts to topple the Iranian regime. However, all

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<sup>193</sup> Pollack et al., *Which Path to Persia?*, 122.

<sup>194</sup> Maloney and Takeyh, "Pathway to Coexistence," 63.

<sup>195</sup> Pollack et al. *Which Path to Persia?*, 141.



of them eventually failed to achieve their objective. During the Bush era, for example, the Iran Freedom and Support Act of 2005 (H.R. 282 and S. 333) approved approximately 85 million dollar to help promote democracy (or enable regime change) in Iran, while simultaneously tightening economic sanctions already in place against Tehran. This was, in the end, another misdirected American initiative. Then, taking a page from the Soviet era U.S. foreign policy used in Eastern Europe, which had been successful in its actual implementation, the Bush Administration used radio broadcasts and funding and other direct assistance to opposition groups aimed at regime change of the Islamic Republic's government as a policy option in Iran. Similarly, Washington worked to defeat the regime's suppression of opposition newspapers, Internet blogs, and other media by increasing Farsi broadcasts by the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe and other information sources.<sup>196</sup>

The key point of failure, however, was the rather simple oversight that the fall of the dictatorial regimes in Eastern Europe was significantly different from the conditions present in Iran at the time of the attempt at implementation of this policy. Iran's theocratic government was not as fragile as those of Eastern Europe. More importantly, perhaps, Iranian society was already inundated with information via a myriad of media sources, which meant radio broadcasts would have little to no effect. In fact, the Bush administration's actions unintentionally adversely impacted the proponents of democracy in Iran, many of whom were seen as puppets of the United States government and referred to as "agents of the Great Satan."

Simultaneously, Iran's domestic affairs, as discussed in Chapter III, were transforming and re-orienting. Tehran's former patrimony became a more directed quest for a more pragmatic, national-interest based approach, most notably within the last decade. After Khomeini's death, Iranian leaders began to realize the impracticality and improbability of promoting their religious ideologies regionally. As such, they chose, instead, to contain their version of Islam within their borders. Since then, Iran, in spite of

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<sup>196</sup> James Philips, "Dealing With Iran's Resurgent Hardliners," *Executive Memorandum*, no.997 (August 11, 2005).

further revolutionary rhetoric, has transformed into a rational, pragmatic actor in the international arena, rather than a revisionist state that had been intent on replicating its governing style outside itself.

#### **D. THE ENGAGEMENT OPTION**

The engagement option is yet another Washington policy consideration when it comes to dealing with Iran. The main tenet of this policy option is to diplomatically encourage Tehran to alter threatening behaviors toward the United States. By offering a number of attractive inducements to Iran—economic, strategic, and diplomatic—the overall end state would be that Iran willingly chooses to alter its own antagonistic policies toward the United States in order to garner the pragmatic benefits of the offer. One of the most salient differences, and potentially significant drawback, includes the patience required. The engagement policy lacks a solid end date, thus, it might take years to implement the desired policy changes while simultaneously reaping the benefits of promises by the United States...if it makes any changes at all. Again, rhetoric and political posturing can circumvent the actual reality.<sup>197</sup>

Adherents to the engagement policy believe that the Islamic Republic is a rational actor within the international community and, therefore, with practical offers on the part of the United States, Tehran's policy choices can be altered and redirected. These proponents also consider Iran an opportunistic government with regional power ambitions. These analysts also argue that sanctions themselves will backfire and explode into an Iranian nationalist backlash that will inspire a regime, whose pride and honor has been wounded, to reject and decline U.S. diplomatic overtures of any character, regardless of the cost. Proponents of the engagement option criticize the containment option's pressure and isolation tactics, which will inevitably fail and have only served to set the baseline for a solid foundation of Iranian elite suspicions toward U.S. policies in general. Instead, they recommend an engagement-*sans*-conditions approach. Rather than using sticks, carrots and practical incentives should be key drivers behind U.S. foreign policy toward Iran in order to achieve the desired aims.

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<sup>197</sup> Pollack et al. *Which Path to Persia?*, 58.

Pollack et al, analyze the engagement policy in two separate categories, ‘incremental/compartmentalized’ route and the ‘grand bargain’ approach. The operational design of these two methods differs in packaging, implementation and orchestration. The compartmentalized approach focuses on specific issues and separates these unique issues from the other. Therefore, separate negotiations take place around individual issues such as Iran’s role in the Levant, nuclear matters, and Gulf security among many others frequently tabled between the Tehran and Washington policymakers. The bilateral discussions, which take place on these specific issues, are considered central to engagement advocates.<sup>198</sup>

On the other hand, the grand bargain approach engages the challenges on a more holistic basis. Instead of separating each issue in bilateral talks with Tehran, Washington addresses a package of Iranian concerns while concurrently seeking to develop a comprehensive, viable solution set involving concessions from both governments.

In 2003, Iranian President Khatami offered the Bush administration what could easily be categorized as the ‘grand bargain.’ However, Washington refused the offer. Many scholars view this refusal as a missed opportunity. A ‘grand bargain’ proposal would include demands exchanged by both Tehran and Washington and agreed upon by both governments. A plausible example of a grand strategy proposal which could be considered for future engagement policy applications toward Iran, might include Tehran’s demands—which might include recovery of frozen assets, waiving economic sanctions, and U.S. acknowledgment of Iran’s current regime, and forgo future efforts to modify it, U.S. acceptance of Iran as a legitimate regional power broker in the Middle East, among others—in exchange for Washington’s desired interests in the bargaining process. Washington’s national interests in this case may include Iran disengaging from further pursuit of its nuclear weapons ambitions, ending its terrorist support and extricating itself from all attempts that might adversely impact efforts geared toward an Arab-Israeli peace.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Pollack et al. *Which Path to Persia?*

<sup>199</sup> Dennis Ross, “Diplomatic Strategies for Dealing with Iran,” in *Iran: Assessing U.S. Strategic Options*, 33-54 (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2008), 47.

The engagement option focus is primarily on positive incentives and neglects the use of negative reinforcement. As such, if it is to be effective, it is incumbent on U.S. leaders to correctly ascertain what specific incentives may shift and re-orient Iran and re-balance the competing interests of the two governments.

In order to conduct a successful engagement policy, it is essential to determine effective incentives or inducements for Iran by U.S. decision makers. Considering Iran's current economic problems, waiving economic sanctions and initiating economic collaboration may ensure that Tehran is willing to curtail its ambitions. In the same vein, regarding Iran's national security concerns, U.S. support for Tehran's civil nuclear program, with full inspections, may wield significant diplomatic weight and may provide the necessary carrot needed in order to change Iran's current political trajectory.

Even if the engagement option fails to achieve a policy shift in the Tehran in short run, according to Mark Bowden, U.S. efforts to collaborate with Iran create significant international leverage, assuring international support when further U.S. sanctions and pressures are needed.<sup>200</sup> Moreover, Tehran's image, in the eyes of the Muslim community, is adversely impacted if it refuses to continually compromise with Washington in the long run. Its "hero of the Islamist cause" image erodes, and in its place, a war-mongering, threatening Iran that is out for its own national interests at the expense of the international community *writ large* replaces it.

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<sup>200</sup> Mark Bowden, "Foreword," in *Negotiating with Iran: Wrestling the Ghosts of History*, ix-xi (Washington, D.C.: United State Institute of Peace Press, 2009), xi.

## VI. CONCLUSION: LISTENING TO THE IRANIAN VOICE

“It is my national duty. I vote, so I tell America that I support my [Ahmadinejad] government, even if I am not free here.” This statement, made by an Iranian schoolteacher, helps reveal the collective sense of the Iranian discontent toward the American containment policy and its militarist approach toward Iran. It also reflects a sense of Iranian solidarity toward their government, regardless of the undemocratic nature of the government.<sup>201</sup> A survey conducted by Terror Free Tomorrow before the 2009 Iranian election showed that “more than 86 percent of Iranians who said they would vote for Ahmadinejad also chose ensuring free elections and a free press as among the most important priorities they have for the Iranian government.”<sup>202</sup>

The Iranian people are speaking. The question here is to what extent is the U.S. government listening to the Iranians’ voices? In the past, successive U.S. administrations’ punitive policy implications towards Iran rarely—if ever—took into account the Iranian people’s thoughts, ideas, inspirations and characteristics. Therefore, all the foreign policy initiatives eventually turned out to be unsuccessful. The U.S.’s foreign policy toward Iran, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, retains many of the elements and central beliefs of those of the previous three decades discussed in this paper. Yet again, the Obama administration has imposed new economic sanctions against Iran. Similar to outcomes of the past, under Presidents Carter, Reagan, Bush, Clinton, and G.W. Bush, many politicians and analysts believe these sanctions are unlikely to achieve success with Tehran.<sup>203</sup> Nothing has changed. The U.S.’ policymakers continue to lack a solid understanding of Iranian history, culture and worldview, which is commonly reflected in their foreign policy goals. The United States fails to also separate Tehran’s rhetoric from

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<sup>201</sup> Babak Rahimi, “Iran: the 2006 Elections and the Making of Authoritarian.” *Nebula* 4, no.1 (March 2007): 289.

<sup>202</sup> *Results of a New Nationwide Public Opinion Survey of Iran before the June 12, 2009 Presidential Elections*, TFT Iran Survey Report (Terror Free Tomorrow the Center for Puplic Opinion, 2009).

<sup>203</sup> United States, *Iran: Reality, Options, and Consequences Part I-Iranian People and Attitudes*, *Hearing Before the Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform House of Representatives, One Hundred Tenth Congress, First Session, October 30, 2007* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2009).

the reality. In short, Tehran's decisions often are made with pragmatic national interests at their core, rather than Washington's mistaken and miscalculated assumptions that center assumption Tehran's goals primarily on a religious-based ideology. Without this level of holistic comprehension applied to its foreign policy decisions, all policy decisions the United States attempts to apply toward the incumbent Iranian regime will most likely end in failure, or at best, in a stalemate. Washington and Tehran will continue to misunderstand each other and misread each other's intentions and ambitions. Compromises cannot then be made. A standoff between the two governments will likely continue and a pervasive mistrust retained among future generations.

In order to achieve normative relations between these unfriendly rival countries, Washington needs to reach out to the Iranian people and to address their concerns—from their perspectives. A greater cultural intuition and sensitivity needs to be adopted when selecting and applying a foreign policy option toward Tehran's regime. As President Reagan often emphasized during his presidency regarding the Soviet Union, "America's greatest ally against the Soviet Union in winning the Cold War was the average Soviet, 'Citizen Ivan.'"<sup>204</sup> This lesson learned should not be lost. In fact, it can readily be applied to relations between the United States and Iran today. For future approaches addressing the question of Tehran, U.S. policy makers need to make concerted efforts to listen to the Iranian people. The people of Iran can ultimately partner with the United States and help work toward U.S. policy goals, increasing their long-term effectiveness and overall success and thawing relations between the two powers.

First and foremost, not widely understood is that ***Iranians are pro-American.*** Iranians are neither against the American people nor America itself but rather against the severe U.S. foreign policies often imposed on Iran that have adversely impacted Iranian social conditions and the overall lives of the Iranian people. As a result of the impact of American sanctions on the lives of the average Iranian, distrust toward the United States' foreign policies has trickled out and beyond government-to-government posturing. Importantly, the Iranian regime stands unfettered by the effects of U.S. economic impacts

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<sup>204</sup> Quoted in United States, *Iran: Reality, Options, and Consequences*, 13.

to the Iranian people *writ large*. However, the average Iranian translates this blame not to their government but to the United States government. Additionally, Iranians place significant emphasis on historical experiences of the past. Although it was almost sixty years ago, Iranians still blame the United States for the coup that ousted Prime Minister Mosaddeq from power in 1953. Making matters worse, resentments and hostilities are exacerbated by disagreements about the United States' terrorist lists and who is on it—and who is not. For example, the United States put Hezbollah, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad groups, considered “freedom fighters” by many Iranians, on the list of terrorist organizations, but neglect to place Iranian opposition groups on the same list.

Further solidifying chilly relations and directly impacting the perceptions of the Iranian public adversely is the U.S. blocking Iranian integration into the international community, such as the U.S. veto against Iran's participation in the World Trade Organization. Moreover, Iranians resent U.S. assistance to regime opposition groups and separatist ethnic minorities intent on regime change. They also resent the U.S. “double standard” toward Israel and Iran in terms of nuclear programs. While the United States allows Israel to maintain its nuclear weapons capacity, Iran is internationally lambasted for taking positive steps toward a nuclear capacity.

Secondly, ***Iranians are not happy***. A study conducted by Kousha and Mohseni shows that at the macro level, Iranians, in particular those who live in large cities such as Tehran, are not happy.<sup>205</sup> Notably, the impact of clerical power and a religious-oriented government directly impact the Iranian women. The same study indicates that women's dissatisfaction with their social conditions is the highest. Additionally, more than fifty percent of the Iranian population is under the age of twenty. This particular demographic is also very dissatisfied and seeks a better life in general. Many blame the U.S.'s foreign policy toward Iran for the greater majority of their social and economic domestic challenges, although a greater percentage increasingly looks at their own government's policies as another part of the problem.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Mahnaz Kousha and Navid Mohseni, “Are Iranians Happy? A comparative Study between Iran and the United States,” *Social Indicators Research* 53, no.3 (December 2000):286.

<sup>206</sup> Kousha and Mohseni, “Are Iranians Happy?”, 286.

Thirdly, *not all Iranian are Islamists*. Younger generations of Iranians do not agree with their country's leadership, in general, and disagree with the "Islamization" pervasive in much of Iran. Secondly, they support a greater emphasis on domestic issues and spending—employment, housing and individual rights—instead of the budgetary expenditures and emphasis given to external and international agendas.<sup>207</sup> Lastly, the great majority of Iranian people increasingly question current governmental structure as well as unelected rule by the Supreme Leader. According to a Terror Free Tomorrow's survey, almost 80 percent of Iranian people, today, desire to elect their leader *vis-à-vis* the 11 percent polled who still favor the current system's policy of unelected rule of Iran's religious leader, the Supreme Leader.<sup>208</sup> These figures indicate the dying momentum once behind the Islamic revolutionaries and their basic ideological framework. Fewer Iranians today support the worldview and structures established by the revolutionaries and are seeking new solutions and new ways forward for Iran in a world increasingly interdependent. Adaptation to the impact of globalization on Iran must take place or it risks its own ultimate demise. This is felt at all levels, but perhaps most especially on the government in a world that is increasingly secularized.

Fourth, *Iranians want nuclear power, not nuclear weapons*. A larger majority of Iranians perceive U.S. hostility toward Iran stems largely from the fact that the United States was once able to control Iran through the U.S.-backed Islamic monarch, who with the current Iranian leadership in charge, Washington is unable to manipulate to do its bidding.<sup>209</sup> Iranians are less convinced that the chilly relations hinge solely on the political rhetoric and the more superficial issues of nuclear weapons and terrorism, among others. As such, both ends of the Iranian political spectrum, both conservatives and reformists, encourage and publicly support development of an Iranian nuclear energy and research platform supervised by the IAEA. Importantly, according to a 2008 Terror Free Tomorrow survey, more than 80 percent of Iranians desire individual voting rights

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<sup>207</sup> Paul Sullivan, "U.S.-Iran Relations since 9/11: A Monologue of Civilizations," *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations* 1 no. 2 (Summer 2002): 178–203.

<sup>208</sup> United States, *Iran: Reality, Options, and Consequences*, 20.

<sup>209</sup> Stephen Zunes, "The U.S. and Iran: Democracy, Terrorism, and Nuclear Weapons," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, (July 26, 2005).



and free elections and greater economic opportunities—currently limited by sanctions and prohibitions key organizations which could help facilitate economic growth such as the WTO—rather than concerned about development of a nuclear weapons program.

More than half of Iranians believe Iran would be safer if it did possess its own nuclear weapons capability. However, when the center-stage issue of nuclear weapons is tabled specifically in relation to the condition of receipt of outside aid, almost four fifths of Iranians would support inspection rights and a provision to not develop nor possess nuclear weapons at all. On the related issue of nuclear energy, almost 80 percent support its development. Of this, only one third favor nuclear weapon development.<sup>210</sup>

Fifth, *Iranians generally desire better relations with the United States and would like to be integrated into and accepted in the global community.* Almost 90 percent of the Iranian population places economic improvement as a top—if not *the* top—government priority. Accordingly, approximately 70 percent of Iranians polled prefer have to their government normalize relations and re-engage in trade with the United States.<sup>211</sup> As a means to achieve this normal state, Iran would need to provide leveraging and compromise with the United States on key issues of concern. These issues would include recognition of Israel and Palestine as independent entities, terminating support to Shi'a insurgent groups in Iraq, partnering with the United States to facilitate the formal establishment of a stable Iraqi regime and provide the transparency the United States desires when it comes to nuclear capacity and particularly nuclear weapons. For more than 60 percent of Iranians, a few of the most important steps Washington could take that would improve opinions of America in Iran include: establishing a free trade treaty between Iran and the United States; withdrawing American forces from Iraq; and increasing Iranian work and study visas for Iranians in the United States.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> United States, *Iran: Reality, Options, and Consequences*, 20.

<sup>211</sup> *Results of a New Nationwide Public Opinion Survey of Iran before the June 12, 2009 Presidential Elections*, TFT Iran Survey Report (Terror Free Tomorrow the Center for Public Opinion, 2009).

<sup>212</sup> *Results of a New Nationwide Public Opinion Survey of Iran before the June 12, 2009.*

Despite the overwhelming Iranian desire for a fully democratic system, the United States' efforts to push the spread of democracy inside Iran would not improve Iranian opinions of America, nor would brokering a comprehensive peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Instead, these actions would backfire and have adverse and unintended consequences since it would be perceived as meddling in Iranian domestic affairs. Therefore, other courses of action need to be considered as alternatives to these two approaches, so as to help eliminate the perception of internal interference by external powers.

Apart from Israel, Iranians now consider the United States as representing Iran's greatest threat. The United States' constant and very public statements regarding potential military action against Iran are taken seriously by the Iranians. Although this may seem like a plan that would help the United States achieve its desired goals and coerce Iran to do the U.S.' bidding, in fact this heightens tensions and increases Iran's resolve to intentionally defy what the United States is asking and strengthen their desire to not compromise on any of the U.S. key issues.

Lastly, almost 70 percent of Iranians encourage financial backing for groups in Palestine and Lebanon, such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah and Iraqi Shi'a militias. Iranians believe that these groups fight against oppressive regimes and external forces.<sup>213</sup>

All of the elements considered above interface with each other in various ways and play a role in the political dancing between Washington and Tehran. However, it is important to once again highlight the Terror Free Tomorrow survey results indicating the Iranian people's desire for self-determination, individual political participation and a desire to help choose the course of Iran's future. This underlines the message the United States should observe, evaluate, and act on and, ultimately, use toward the advantage of easing relations between the two countries: it is *the people* of Iran that can be the trigger point for stabilizing and helping normalize the uneasy, tense relations. The people of Iran could, in fact, be the most important element in the puzzling relations between Washington and Tehran. The Iranian people could help to facilitate the United States

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<sup>213</sup> United States, *Iran: Reality, Options, and Consequences*, 20.

achievement of its goals—a more democratic and non-nuclear Iran—and significantly impact the future of Iran on their own terms, as well as the current Tehran regime.

The last 30 years of U.S. foreign policy towards Iran, including economic sanctions, political pressure, containment, intimidation and rogue state rollback, have failed to alter the Islamic regime's aggressive diplomacy and, instead, have fueled hatred toward U.S. foreign policies as well as assisted hardliners in gaining legitimacy for their aggressive policies. It is important to understand that a regime change in Iran would probably happen not because the United State demands it, but because the Iranian 'youth' demands it. American policy toward Iran should proceed very carefully. It is time for the Obama administration to throw away the containment policy inherited by past administrations and embark on a new strategy of fair engagement.

To create a more democratic and internationally accepted Iran will require taking into account the Iranian people's cultural pride, resentment of foreign meddling, and inspirations for a better future. To solve the Iranian puzzle, U.S. strategy should be shifted from an oppressive approach to a 'constructive' policy. Iran should be integrated into global world politics, instead of isolated from the world. Finally, the U.S. administration should balance its foreign policy strategy toward both Israel and Iran.

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